FRAGILE
LONGING
She was the
consolation prize...
USA Today Bestselling Author
Cora Reilly

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Sofia knows how it feels to be the consolation prize.

Too young.

Not blonde.

And definitely not an ice princess.

Her sister is—*was*—all those things. Perfection. Until she wasn't. Until she ran off to be with the enemy and left her fiancé behind.

Now, Sofia is given to Danilo in her sister's stead, knowing she'll never be more than second best. Yet, she can't stop longing for the love of the man she's crushed on since he was still her sister's.

Danilo is a man who's used to getting what he wants.

Power.

Respect.

The sought-after ice princess.

Until another man steals his bride-to-be. Danilo knows that for a man in his position, losing his woman can lead to a loss of face.

Wounded pride.

Thirst for revenge.

A dangerous combination—one Danilo can't leave behind, not even when a girl just as precious takes her sister's place to placate him. Yet, she's got one flaw: she's not her sister.

Unable to forget what he's lost, Danilo might lose what he's been given.

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PROLOGUE

Thou shalt not covet.

I'd pined for Danilo even when he had still been engaged to my sister. It had been an innocent infatuation of a young girl, fantasizing how things would be if he were mine. My knight-in-shining armor, my Disney prince.

It had been my favorite daydream, until a simple fantasy had turned to reality when my sister couldn't marry him.

That dream soon turned into a nightmare, and a silly girl's fantasy burst.

He didn't want me.

No two snowflakes are identical in shape; every single one of them is unique—magnificent, icy perfection.

Like my sister.

I'd tried to imitate her, but an imitation would never be the original. I was an echo of the perfect melody. A shadow of an immaculate image. Always less. Never enough.

Serafina had been close to perfect in people's eyes when she was still around, but now that she was nothing but a fading memory, her absence amplified all that she had been. She'd become larger than life.

She lingered in every corner of the house, and worse, in the minds of the people she'd left behind.

How can you beat a memory?

You can't.

My fingers trembled as I smoothed down my wedding dress. It wasn't my name that would be whispered in the pews today.

Because I was the consolation prize.

The surrogate bride.

Worst of all, I was not my sister.

I peered at my reflection, my face hazy through the fine gossamer veil. Dressed like this, I almost looked like Serafina, minus the blonde hair. Still less. Always less. But maybe Danilo would see the similarities between my sister and me. Maybe, for a second, he would look at me with the same longing he used to direct at Serafina.

Before he realized I wasn't Serafina. Before that look of disappointment settled on his face again.

Less than he wanted.

Tearing the veil from my hair, I tossed it away. I was done trying to be someone else. Danilo would have to see me for who I was, and if that meant he'd never look at me twice, then so be it.

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ONE

Danilo

“I can’t marry you.”

My fiancée’s words echoed in my head. Peering down at the engagement ring she’d given back to me, I tried to pinpoint my emotions—a potent mixture of fury and shock. The ring mocked me where it lay in my palm. Serafina had hardly been able to stand my closeness when she’d uttered those words.

I’d known Serafina for as long as I could remember. Long before I’d met her, her name had been whispered reverently among the boys and even the men in our circles.

The regal ice princess’s beauty featured in many fantasies.

Like magpies drawn in by a shiny object, many wanted to possess her. When she’d been promised to me at the age of fifteen, I’d reveled in the admiration and jealousy of my fellow Made Men. I’d won the sought-after prize and could call her mine.

For years, I’d counted the days to our wedding.

Everything had seemed to be working in my favor. I had been about to become the youngest underboss of the Outfit

with the Capo’s niece, the ice princess, as my wife. I’d felt invincible.

Many consider arrogance and pride a sin, and I was punished harshly for those qualities.

Days before I was supposed to take over from my father as Underboss, my little sister Emma was in a car accident. Now, she was trapped in a wheelchair with no future ahead of her. The mafia world wasn’t kind. Girls and women who had obvious flaws were cast aside and deemed unworthy, doomed to a life in the shadows either as spinsters or stuck in a marriage with the first scum who accepted them.

On the day of our wedding, Serafina was stolen from me, kidnapped by our cruelest enemy: the Camorra of Las Vegas.

When their Capo sent her back to us, she wasn’t the same girl I’d known. She was lost to me, broken, and I couldn’t fix her.

My meticulously planned future was in shambles. I was left with a disabled, heartbroken sister and a dying father. Left without a wife.

I closed my eyes after ending the call with my father. He insisted that we needed to demand a bond with Cavallaro’s family. He wanted the connection to the Capo, and though I agreed, moving on from Serafina so soon after losing her cut me like an acid blade.

Life had to go on, though, and I had to appear strong. I was young. Many expected me to fail at the task of ruling over Indianapolis. They were waiting for that moment, for my fall from grace. I curled my fingers into a fist around the ring and went in search of my Capo and Serafina’s father.

Ten minutes later, Serafina’s father Pietro Mione, her brother Samuel, and our Capo Dante Cavallaro met with me in the office of the Mione mansion to settle the matter of the broken wedding bond. The matter would cause a riptide of rumors regardless of what we decided today. It was too late for damage control.

I released a sigh. “My father insists that I marry someone from your family,” I said emotionlessly, even as my insides burned with rage and guilt. “A bond between our families is necessary, especially at this time.”

Pietro sighed and slumped in his chair. Samuel shook his head and glared at me. “Serafina won’t marry. She needs time to heal.”

I’d have given her the time she needed like I’d told her, but she didn’t want to marry me anymore.

“There are other options,” Dante drawled.

The rage that burned inside me spilled free. “What options? I won’t accept the daughter of any other Underboss. My city is important. I won’t settle for less than was promised!”

More than that, I didn’t want to return to my dying father and already-grieving mother to tell them about yet another blow for our family. We’d gone through enough. They had all gone through enough. It was up to me to protect them.

Dante scowled. “Watch your tone, Danilo. I realize this is a difficult situation, but I expect respect nonetheless.”

Samuel looked as if he wanted to attack me. “You can’t have Fina!”

“You can’t have Anna, either,” Dante said.

I’d never considered his daughter as an option. If I married her, it would only cause me problems. I doubted Dante wouldn’t shove his nose into my business if it concerned his offspring. “You need my support in this war. You need a strong family at your back.”

“Is that a threat?”

“That’s a fact, Dante. I think you’re a good Capo, but I insist I get what my family deserves. I won’t settle for less.”

“I won’t force Fina into a marriage, not after what she went through,” Pietro said.

Dante nodded. “I agree.”

I understood their reasoning. Serafina didn’t want to marry me, and I wouldn’t force her into a bond when she’d

already suffered a loss of control recently. “We’re at an impasse, then.”

There was only one option. It was one I wished to avoid but couldn’t. Father had immediately suggested my ex-fiancée’s younger sister as a substitute. A ridiculous idea, but the only viable option.

Dante and Pietro looked at each other, probably considering exactly that option.

Pietro closed his eyes. “Is that what you ask of me, Dante?”

“Pietro, if we follow the rules, Danilo could demand to marry Serafina. They were engaged.”

I waited for them to settle whatever they had to. There was only one solution to our problem.

When Pietro opened his eyes, they were hard, full of warning. “I will give you Sofia.”

My father had been right.

Sofia. She was a child. Ten years younger than me. I’d never even spared her a glance. “She’s what, eleven?” Even though it was the only option, a new wave of anger rose in me. Anger for the situation and absolute rage toward Remo Falcone.

“Twelve in April,” Samuel corrected, scowling at me. His hands were curled into fists, but I had a feeling his anger wasn’t directed only at me.

“I’m ten years older than her. I was promised a wife now.”

“You’ll be busy with this war and establishing your reign over Indianapolis. A later wedding would be advantageous,” Dante said.

Ten fucking years younger than me. I couldn’t even think of her as a woman, let alone as my future wife. Just trying to imagine Sofia as a grownup made me feel like a fucking pervert. Serafina hadn’t been that much older when she’d been promised to me, but we were close in age. I’d wanted

her even back then because she was the ice princess, because she was so beautiful that everyone wanted her.

I couldn't imagine wanting Sofia like that, couldn't imagine wanting her at all. She was a child. She wasn't Serafina.

I was going to kill Remo Falcone for stealing my fiancée, for breaking her in ways that made it impossible for her to marry me. I was going to destroy everything that mattered to him. I wouldn't rest until I'd ruined his life like he had ruined mine.

"Danilo?" Dante asked carefully, and I realized I'd zoned out.

It didn't matter what I wanted. This bond would save Emma. That was all I could hope for at this point.

"I have one condition."

"What condition?" Dante's voice was clipped. His patience was running dry. These last few months had tested us all.

My eyes slanted to Samuel. He was watching me with narrowed eyes. Did I trust him with my sister? More than any of the other prospects. Father would marry Emma off at some point, and nobody of worth wanted her. She'd be cast off to someone who hoped to improve his position, someone who didn't deserve her.

"He marries my sister Emma," I said.

Samuel's face twisted with shock. "She's in a—"

He stopped short. Good for him because I wanted to kill him.

"In a wheelchair, yes. Which is why nobody of worth wants her. My sister deserves only the best, and you are the heir to the Minneapolis Outfit. If you all want this bond, Samuel will marry my sister, then I'll marry Sofia."

"Fuck," Samuel muttered. "What kind of twisted deal is that?"

"Why? Your father has been testing the waters for possible brides, and my sister is a Mancini. She's a good

match.”

Samuel took a deep breath before nodding. “I’ll marry your sister.”

I bared my teeth at his tone.

“Then it’s settled?” Pietro asked. “You’ll marry Sofia and accept the cancelation of the engagement with Fina?”

I gave a sharp nod. “It’s not what I want, but it’ll have to do.”

“It’ll have to do?” Samuel growled, stepping forward with narrowed eyes. “That’s my baby sister you’re talking about. She’s not some fucking thing you accept as a consolation prize.”

But she was the consolation prize. We all knew it. I laughed bitterly. “You might want to remember that as well when you meet my sister.”

“Enough,” Dante growled.

“The wedding will have to wait until Sofia is of age,” Pietro said in a tired voice.

Did he think I *wanted* a child bride? “Of course. My sister won’t marry before her eighteenth birthday, either.”

Six long years. It would give me more time to stabilize my rule over Indianapolis, which was the one thing I’d hated about marrying Serafina, but I’d wanted her and she couldn’t wait too long. But now, now I’d have plenty of time to strengthen my reign, to enjoy myself some more—that’s how Father put it. Six years was a long time. So much could happen before then. I wouldn’t lose another girl. I’d make sure Sofia was safe, safer than Serafina had been.

Pietro nodded.

“Then it’s decided,” I said. “I have to return home soon. We can settle the details at a later point.”

Dante nodded.

“Just one more thing. I don’t want word about Samuel’s bond to my sister to get out yet. She doesn’t need to know this was a deal in exchange for Sofia.”

I moved toward the door, wanting out of this house, out of this city, but most of all away from Serafina. Footsteps sounded behind me, but I didn’t turn. There was nothing else left to say, not today.

“Danilo, wait,” Samuel demanded.

Narrowing my eyes, I turned around. “What do you want?”

We’d come to a tentative understanding while trying to save Serafina from Remo Falcone’s clutches, but I had a feeling it wouldn’t last. We were both alphas and didn’t deal well with someone who didn’t bow to our wishes.

“Sofia deserves more than being second best.”

That was probably true. True for both our sisters. Fate had dealt Emma some harsh cards, and she deserved only the best. Would she ever get it? Probably not. “I’ll treat Sofia with the same respect as I have always treated Serafina.” My mouth twisted as I voiced her name. “Remember to do the same with Emma.”

Samuel shook his head. “Quid pro quo?”

I said nothing. This was messed up. We both got girls we didn’t want for a bond that would ensure our power. Samuel and I were proud men to a fault, and Remo Falcone had trampled on that pride. A pride we wanted to rebuild.

I was beginning to think it would be both our downfall.

I still remembered the first time I saw Danilo. It was a year before he was supposed to marry my sister. He'd come over to discuss details with Dad. Driven by curiosity, I'd pretended to be heading toward the kitchen to catch a glimpse of him. He stood in our foyer, talking to Dad. The moment I spotted him, my heart did a strange flip it had never done before. He gave me a smile, and again my heart beat wildly and my belly warmed. He reminded me of the princes that girls always dreamed about. Tall and handsome and chivalrous. His dark brown hair was smoothed back casually, and he had a small dimple in his right cheek when he smiled.

I'd thought he'd remain a fantasy forever. Whenever I fantasized about him, I'd felt guilty—until, suddenly, he was *mine*. At least officially, because his heart still belonged to my sister.

The day I found out I would be marrying Danilo, I had been sitting at my desk in my room when someone knocked, then Dad stepped in. He'd sent me to my room a couple of hours ago like so often in the months since Fina had been kidnapped. Everyone thought I was too young to understand what was going on, to handle the severity of it all.

"Sofia, can I have a word with you?" Dad asked.

I looked up from my homework with a small frown. His voice sounded off.

"Did I do something wrong?" It was the only explanation for why my parents would seek me out. They'd been too busy since the kidnapping, so I was used to being on my own or with my cousin Anna. I wasn't mad at them. They were hurting so much. I just wanted things to go back to how they used to be. I wanted us to be happy.

Dad came over to me and touched the top of my head, his eyes sad. "Of course not, ladybug."

I smiled at the use of my nickname. It always reminded me how much he loved me even if he couldn’t always show it.

“Let’s sit over there, okay?” He pointed toward my pink sofa, then walked over to it and sank down, looking tired. I followed and sat beside him. For a long time, he didn’t say anything, only regarded me in a way that made my throat feel all tight.

“Dad?” I whispered. “Is Fina okay?”

“Yeah . . .” He swallowed and took my hand. “You know we have rules in our world. Rules we all have to follow. Danilo can’t marry Serafina anymore, so we decided that we’d promise you to him.”

I blinked, shocked. After a moment, my belly fluttered madly. “Really?” I cringed at how excited I sounded.

Dad’s eyes softened further. He squeezed my hand lightly. “In many years, you’ll marry him. After you turn eighteen. So, you don’t have to worry about it now.”

Six years and six months. “Is Fina sad?”

Dad smiled. “No, she knows rules have to be followed.”

I nodded slowly. “Danilo really wants to marry me when I’m grown up?”

I couldn’t believe it. Danilo was so handsome and clever. Serafina and he had looked like monarchs beside each other, like a Disney dream couple.

Dad kissed my forehead. “Of course, he does. Any man would be grateful to have you as his wife. He chose you.”

I beamed up at my father.

With a deep sigh, he pulled me against him. “Oh, ladybug.” He sounded sad, not excited, and I wasn’t sure why.

I’d dreamed about Danilo all night. I couldn’t wait to talk to Anna about it. She’d come over today before she and her family had to return to Chicago.

I’d woken before sunrise, too giddy to sleep further.

Lying on my belly on my bed, I couldn’t stop writing Danilo’s and my name over and over again, no matter how childish it was. Sofia Mancini sounded perfect to me.

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in!” I called, hiding my silly scribbling from view.

Fina stepped in, blonde hair trailing down her shoulder. She was in simple jeans and a T-shirt and not wearing make-up, but she was still the prettiest girl I knew. Why would Danilo choose me over her? She was already grown up. She was the perfect princess for someone like him.

I looked away from her, ashamed of my pettiness. Fina had been kidnapped and hurt.

“I wanted to talk to you about Danilo. I assume Dad already talked to you?”

“Are you mad at me?” I asked, worried that Fina felt bad because she was now without a future husband.

“Mad?” she asked, looking confused as she walked over to me.

“Because Danilo wants to marry me now and not you.”

“No. I’m not. I want you to be happy. Are you okay?”

Despite my embarrassment, I showed my scribbling to her, wanting to share it with someone else.

Fina’s eyes widened. “You like him?”

“I’m sorry. I liked him even when you were promised to him. He’s cute and chivalrous.”

Fear of her reaction blasted through me, but she surprised me when she bent and kissed my head. Relief flooded me.

Fina fixed me with a warning look. “He’s a grown man, Sofia. Many years will pass before you marry him. He won’t come anywhere near you until then.”

“I know. Dad told me.” I didn’t mind waiting, and it made me happy that Danilo had agreed to wait so long for me. That meant he really wanted me.

“So, we’re okay?” I asked, still unable to believe that Fina wasn’t mad at me for taking her fiancé.

“Better than okay,” Fina said before she left.

I hesitated, then decided to follow her to ask her more about Danilo. I didn’t know much about him. When I arrived on the gallery and peered down into the foyer, I spotted Fina and Danilo.

“Sofia is a girl. How could you agree to that bond, Danilo?”

My eyes widened at the rudeness in her tone. I thought she was okay with me marrying Danilo? It didn’t sound like it.

Danilo looked furious. “She is a child. Too young for me. She’s my sister’s age, for God’s sake. But you know what’s expected. And we won’t marry until she’s of age. I never touched you, and I won’t touch her.”

“You should have chosen someone else. Not Sofia.”

“I didn’t choose her. I chose you. But you were taken from me, and now I have no choice but to marry your sister even though it’s you I want!”

He didn’t want me? I sucked in a sharp breath as my chest constricted. Tears pricked my eyes.

Danilo and Fina looked up.

I whirled around and stormed back to my room where I flung myself on my bed and began crying. Dad had lied to me. Danilo hadn’t chosen me. He still wanted Fina. Of course, he did. She was so pretty and blonde. People often mourned the fact that I hadn’t inherited Mom’s blonde hair.

“Go away!” I yelled at the knock on my door and buried my face deeper in the pillow.

“Sofia, can I talk to you?” Danilo said.

I froze. Danilo had never approached me. Slowly, I sat up and wiped my eyes. I hopped off my bed and checked my

face in the mirror. My eyes were puffy and my nose red. Fina was a pretty crier. I was not.

I tiptoed to the door, my stomach twisting with nerves as I opened it. Danilo and Fina waited in the hallway.

Fina smiled at me, but my eyes were drawn to Danilo. I had to crane my neck back because he was so tall. My cheeks heated, but I could do nothing about my body's reaction to Danilo.

"Can I talk to you for a moment?" he asked.

I tried to hide my shock and quickly looked at Fina to see if it was okay.

"Sure," she said.

I walked over to my sofa, suddenly self-conscious about all the pink in my room. I doubted Danilo liked the color very much. I sank down on my sofa, curling my fingers into fists in my lap to hide their shaking. Danilo left the door open and came over to me. He scanned my room, and I cringed when his gaze lingered on the array of stuffed animals on my bed. I didn't cuddle with them anymore, I just had trouble throwing them away. Now I wished I had done it. Danilo must think of me as a silly little girl now. He sat down beside me but with plenty of space between us. From the hallway, Fina gave me a faint smile, then walked out of view, but I knew she'd be close by.

I risked a glance at Danilo. His dark hair was styled back but slightly mussed up, and he was dressed completely in black. I didn't usually like black, but it looked very handsome on Danilo.

He turned to me, dark eyes locking on mine. My skin heated even more, and I had to look down into my lap. He cleared his throat. "What you overheard in the lobby wasn't meant for your ears."

I nodded. "It's okay. I know you wanted Serafina." My voice shook.

"Sofia," Danilo said in a firm voice that made me look up. I wasn't sure what his expression meant. He definitely didn't

look happy. “I chose you. Serafina and I won’t work after what happened. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. That’s why I said what I said.”

I searched his face briefly before looking away. He looked honest, but a hint of doubt remained in me. What I’d seen downstairs hadn’t seemed like a show for Fina. Danilo had looked honestly disappointed over losing her. Yet, I wanted to believe that he had really chosen me to be his future bride, that Dad didn’t have to talk him into it.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

I forced a smile. “Yeah.”

“Good.” He stood, and for a moment, our eyes met again. His mouth tightened in a way I didn’t understand, then he turned and left.

I peered down at my hands, torn between excitement and disappointment. Wiggling my fingers, I wondered when I’d get an engagement ring. Fina had gotten hers immediately when our parents had decided on the bond.

But maybe this time, they’d wait. It would be frowned upon if an engagement was made public so shortly after Fina was saved.

I stood and headed over to my bed. I grabbed my stuffed animals and tossed them to the ground, then removed a few embarrassing posters of horses from my walls. After I’d removed a few too-frilly dresses from my wardrobe and tossed them on the stuffed animal heap, I hurried downstairs to grab a garbage bag. Danilo wanted someone as poised as my sister. If I wanted him to want me, I couldn’t act like a little girl anymore.

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TWO

Danilo

Returning home after ending my engagement to Serafina felt like admitting defeat. Few of my men knew of the cancelation yet. If it had been up to me, I'd have kept the matter under the rug for a while, but Father had insisted we tell our Captains.

That's why I'd called for a meeting first thing after I returned to Indianapolis. I had ten Captains who were responsible for different areas of the business. One of them was my cousin Marco, who happened to be one of my best friends. His father had died a few months ago from the same cancer that was slowly devouring my father. They'd both been chain smokers since their teenage days, and both paid the bitter price for it.

I flipped open the Zippo, then closed it. I'd stopped smoking six months ago exactly because of this, but I couldn't part ways with the lighter that my grandfather had given to me for my fourteenth birthday.

I cleared my throat, realizing my men had been staring at me and waiting for me to say something. I'd called them in, after all. They sat around the long glass table in my office, their eyes on me. I was the youngest, even Marco was

almost a year older than me. When I'd started holding meetings in my own house and no longer in my parents' mansion, I'd made sure to keep my office as modern and functional as possible—glass and sleek black wood. I wanted to show my men that things would change now that I was in power, and outward appearances always were a good start. My father had been a good Underboss, but I had to find my own style of ruling.

I pushed up from my chair, preferring to stand so I could have a good view of everyone.

So far, only Marco knew of the engagement debacle.

Steeling myself, I told my men about the canceled engagement. Their reactions ranged from surprise to approval. None of them seemed to consider it a bad thing.

My oldest Captain nodded. His white hair showed his age, that of a man who'd served as a Captain in Indianapolis for longer than I had been on earth—a fact he'd sometimes let show in the beginning. "It makes sense. They can't expect you to marry someone the enemy has defiled."

I gritted my teeth. My first instinct was to contradict him and tell him the truth—that I hadn't canceled the engagement but my fiancée had.

Instead, I nodded, too proud to admit defeat. Marco didn't say anything, nor did he react. I went on to tell them about my engagement with Sofia, and as expected, my men accepted the bond. For them, all that mattered was that our territory got the recognition it deserved. Women were interchangeable if they had the expected status. It wasn't uncommon for girls to be promised at an early age, even to older men, as long as the wedding was postponed until after their eighteenth birthday.

Despite their acceptance of the bond, a bitter aftertaste remained in my mouth after telling them. I'd always been glad to have a bride my age. Serafina and I would have had at least a few things in common. We knew the same people from our shared social events. Apart from that, Serafina and

I shared our outward poised behavior. We could have made a marriage work.

I doubted Sofia and I had anything in common, certainly not now. She was a little kid. When I'd seen her pink room with the pony posters on her walls, I'd considered canceling the whole thing, but again my pride stopped me. I wanted to marry someone high-ranking, someone close to Dante to establish my power even more, and that left only Sofia.

Soon the discussion turned to our usual updates regarding drug trade and the Bratva problem.

I was glad when the meeting was over. Only Marco remained to have a drink. We played a round of darts while having a cold beer without saying a single word to each other. Marco knew me well enough to recognize my need for silence.

Eventually, after my second beer, I leaned against the pool table in my man cave—as my mother always called it. "What do you think?"

Marco slanted me a look and took a deliberate sip from his drink. We were often mistaken for brothers because of the similarities in our looks. Same brown hair and eyes, and the famous strong Mancini chin.

He gave a shrug. "It's a messed-up deal. You realize neither Emma nor Sofia will be happy if they find out you and Samuel struck an agreement to marry each other's sister."

Emma would be devastated. Sofia probably wouldn't react much better. But in our circles, every marriage was based on a deal of sorts. Always quid pro quo. Love was very rarely the reason behind a bond. "They won't find out."

The look Marco gave me was full of doubt. "You know how easily rumors spread in our circles."

"I wasn't talking about the deal when I asked for your opinion," I clarified. "I'm talking about Sofia. I don't know how I feel about marrying her. What do you think?"

“You won’t marry her for another six years. Until then, even you, stubborn bastard that you are, will have gotten over losing Serafina. You get a Cavallaro niece, that’s what matters, right?”

It should have. From a tactical standpoint, my position hadn’t been weakened. And yet, it felt like I’d taken a deep fall. “She’s too young.”

“Of course, she is, but it’s not like you’re marrying her any time soon. Trust me, in ten or fifteen years, you’ll thank your lucky stars that you have a young wife.”

“We’ll see.” I motioned at the dart board again. “Another round.”

Marco grabbed the darts without protest and began throwing. “What about Emma?”

“What about her?”

“She was supposed to live with you so your mother can focus on caring for your dad. But now that Serafina won’t be moving in, that’s not going to work out, right?”

“Emma’s been getting more independent these last few months. She doesn’t need as much support as she used to. I’ll employ a nanny who specializes in children with disabilities. The maids can take care of the rest.”

“You realize that you work a lot and are barely home? It’s not like you’ll have a ton of time to spend with her.”

“I’ll make time,” I muttered.

“It wasn’t your fault, Danilo. You have to stop blaming yourself for the accident.”

I glared at him. “This discussion is over.”

Marco sighed but finally shut up and continued to play darts.

Emma’s accident wasn’t something I wanted to think about, much less discuss with him. It was bad enough that it haunted my dreams.

The next day, I visited my parents. Emma still lived with them, but I'd promised her that she could move in with me today.

When I stepped into the house I'd grown up in, my chest tightened like it always did on my visits lately. The soft whir of Emma's wheelchair sounded, and she appeared in the doorway of the living room, worry reflected in her brown eyes. Her still-wet hair was piled atop her head in a messy bun. I'd tried to protect her from the darkness of the last few months, but Serafina's kidnapping had been the trending topic in our circles, even among the children. Emma had witnessed the tumultuous events at my canceled wedding. She knew more than she should.

I headed over to her and hugged her, kissing her forehead before I straightened. She felt frail in my arms, as if a strong gust of wind could break her. "How are you?"

In the first months after the accident, she'd often felt an almost stabbing pain in her legs—not to mention the emotional turmoil she'd been experiencing when she realized she wouldn't be able to use her legs like she used to, would never dance ballet again.

"I'm fine, but what about you? Mom told me that you can't marry Serafina anymore and have to marry Sofia instead." She and Sofia were the same age, and both had already suffered the cruel side effects of being raised in the mafia. Occasionally, they had played together at gatherings. Now, Emma could only sit on the sidelines while the other kids ran around. All the anger and resentment of the past mixed with the new rage I felt, but I swallowed it.

"I don't mind. I'll marry Sofia in six years. That's a good thing." It was a lie I'd have to use a lot in the future.

Emma tilted her head as if she wasn’t sure what to believe. Suddenly, harsh coughing flooded down the stairs from the second floor.

Emma winced. “Dad’s been worse these last few days. I’m scared for him.”

I squeezed her shoulder. She had her own future to worry about, and yet fate had cruelly added Father’s deteriorating health to her plate of worries. The coughing continued, and Mom’s voice rang out.

“Let me check on them,” I said. I hurried up the stairs and found my parents in the bathroom of their master suite. Dad perched on the bathtub, bent over, his body shaking as he coughed. Splatters of blood dotted the tiles at his feet and his mouth was covered with it as well. My mother was rubbing his back, her face ashen as she whispered words of reassurance.

They were lies. One look at Dad was enough to tell anyone that the coming Christmas would be his last—if he even made it that far.

I didn’t allow the dreaded sadness to take root in me.

Dad looked up and slowly straightened from his hunched position. His struggle to contain more coughs showed on his pasty skin. He wiped the blood off his lips with the back of his hand, and Mom quickly handed him a washcloth. While he cleaned his face, she came over to me and kissed my cheek. Her eyes swam with fear. “I don’t know what we did to deserve this,” she whispered.

I did. Maybe Mom preferred to pretend my father and I were normal businessmen, but we all knew that wasn’t true. Dad staggered to his feet and gave me a weak smile. “The deal with Pietro stands?”

I’d reported back to him right after my meeting with Samuel, Pietro, and Dante. I wasn’t sure if he just wanted me to confirm it again or if his memory was starting to get spotty due to his sickness. “Everything’s settled, but like I

said, Emma’s engagement to Samuel stays a secret for the time being.”

“I think it’s a mistake to wait to announce the bond,” Mom said. “Maybe people would stop pitying her if they knew she’s going to marry a future Underboss. And maybe Cincinnati will realize their mistake. May they rot in hell, all of them.” Mother crossed herself as if God would grant her wish to her that way.

“If we announce it now, people will catch on and realize we struck a deal. Emma will be devastated if she finds out Samuel only agreed to marry her if I marry Sofia.”

“You would have married Sofia either way,” Dad said.

It was true. Sofia was a good match for me, at least from a political standpoint.

And yet it felt as if I’d been bested.

I closed my bag. I’d packed enough for exactly one night. The Cavallaros’ Christmas party was tomorrow, and I was expected to attend. My parents insisted it would look bad if I stayed away, and they were probably right. If your Capo invited you to a party, you were expected to attend. I wasn’t looking forward to my trip to Chicago. I’d leave tomorrow morning and then return the day after. Perhaps I should have aimed to spend more time with my future family, considering the Mione clan would be there, too, but losing Serafina was still too fresh. So far, I’d avoided social gatherings altogether. I hadn’t even attended Pietro’s fiftieth birthday party.

Pietro’s name flashed on my cellphone. I considered not taking the call. He wouldn’t call me for good news. None of

our recent conversations had been remotely pleasant. Maybe Dante had canceled his fucking Christmas party. Of course, Pietro wouldn't call me for something like that. I didn't want to attend it anyway, but not attending would suggest I was still hung up on Serafina.

"Pietro, what can I do for you? I'm busy."

"I won't take long. I just . . . I have to tell you something."

From the tone of his voice, I knew I'd hate whatever he had to say.

"What is it?"

"Serafina is pregnant. She's seventeen weeks along."

The news hit me like a sledgehammer. Another reminder of how Remo had taken her from me. As if even from afar he'd found another way to humiliate me by showing me again how he'd dishonored my fiancée.

"I thought it best that you hear it from us and not someone else."

"How considerate of you," I gritted out, feeling like my insides were going up in flames. Anger had become a familiar companion. "Thank you for letting me know."

"I'd understand if you decided not to attend due to these circumstances."

Everything in me screamed to take the easy way out. I didn't want to see Serafina again, especially not now that I knew she carried Remo Falcone's child. Yet, my pride was in tatters and I wouldn't allow anyone to stomp it to the ground completely, especially not Remo Falcone. "I don't see why I should. Serafina is no longer my concern. Sofia is my fiancée now." Even I could hear the lingering bitterness in my voice.

Pietro cleared his throat. "Very well. See you then."

For a long time after I ended the call, I stared at nothing.

The whirr of the wheelchair announced Emma's appearance. I schooled my features into an expression of calm when she appeared in the doorframe.

“Are you okay?” she asked, her too-attentive eyes taking in my face. Emma knew me too well, and she was simply too good at reading other people’s emotions.

“I’m fine,” I pressed out. She was too young to be weighed down by my problems. Besides, she had her own issues to conquer.

She bit her lip. “Okay.”

Forcing a smile, I walked over to her and squeezed her shoulder. “I’m leaving tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll be with Mom and Dad then, right?”

I nodded, but then an idea struck me. “Why don’t you come along? I’m in need of company.”

Her entire face transformed into pure joy and surprise. “Really? Won’t I be a bother?”

I squatted in front of her and gripped her knees. “You aren’t a bother, Emma.”

Having Emma with me in Chicago would certainly hold me back, which was exactly why I needed Emma there with me. I rarely lost my shit when she was around. I wanted to protect her from that side of me, and I *really* needed someone to stop me from losing my shit. Seeing Serafina again might very well make me lose it altogether.

After dinner, I called my father to inform him that he and Mother wouldn’t have to take care of Emma in the next few days.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Father asked. He sounded weaker than last time I’d talked to him, as if he could barely take in enough breath to press out a single word.

“Emma needs to be among people.”

“You know how people always stare at her.”

“I know, but I don’t give a fuck. Let them stare.”

The moment Emma and I entered the Cavallaro mansion through the back entrance—because that one was wheelchair accessible—and stepped into the lobby, people's attention shifted toward us. It was difficult to determine who of us was the center of their open curiosity—Emma in her wheelchair or myself. Dante and his wife Valentina headed toward us and I shook their hands. After that, Emma and I moved into the living area where most of the guests had gathered.

Emma gave me an embarrassed smile. "People are staring."

"They're staring at me. The abandoned bridegroom," I said in a forced joking voice.

Emma's eyes widened. Luckily, Dante's daughter, Anna, and Sofia were heading our way. Sofia gave me a bright smile. Her cheeks turned red when I smiled back at her.

"Hi," she said. She smoothed out her dress and bit her lip, appearing almost as if she were waiting for something. Emma and Dante's daughter hugged and picked up a conversation while I was left to stare at Sofia's expectant face.

"How are you?" Sofia asked, then flushed an even deeper red.

I frowned, wondering where she was going with this. "I'm fine." My tone was clipped. Then my eyes landed on her. Serafina entered the room with Samuel, their arms linked. She was dressed in an elegant, loose-fitting dress. My gaze lingered on her midriff, looking for the bump that her choice of clothing managed to conceal. Soon, that would be impossible, and everyone would know that Remo Falcone

had managed to humiliate me and the Outfit in another way. It would be the scandal of the century.

The expectant, curious looks from everyone around me would only amplify then.

Serafina glanced my way, and our eyes met. She smiled politely, then looked away, moving on with her gaze like she had done with her life. Like so often in the last few weeks, anger surged inside me. It was unreasonable to blame Serafina for any of this. She was the victim. She'd suffered for all our sins and would continue to do so.

After a moment, I realized Sofia was watching me. I gave her another quick smile, then turned to Emma. "I'll grab drinks and something to eat. You've got company now?" The last was addressed to Sofia and Anna. Both girls nodded.

Without another word, I walked away in search of the open bar. After a drink of Scotch, I felt more at ease. Still, I kept searching the room for Serafina. My brain just couldn't let it rest. Frustrated at myself, I went in search of Pietro or Samuel. A cursory glance told me Emma was still talking to Anna and Sofia.

When I finally found Pietro, he was standing on the terrace in the winter cold, talking to Dante.

"Am I interrupting anything?" I asked as I joined them.

"No, come join us," Dante said. The worry of the last few months that had settled in every line on my face also showed on his.

"When are you going to make it public?" I didn't have to elaborate what I meant.

Pietro and Dante exchanged a look, then Pietro sighed. He took another sip from his drink. "We'll try to keep it a secret for as long as possible. But I doubt we can cover it up for more than two more months. People will get suspicious if Serafina stays away from social events."

"Why didn't she get an abortion? Did she find out too late?"

“She didn’t want an abortion,” Pietro said. His voice made it clear that his choice would have been different if it had been up to him.

“But she’s going to give it away for someone else to raise?”

Dante shook his head, and Pietro emptied the rest of his glass then lit a cigarette. For a moment, I considered asking him for a smoke. I felt like getting drunk and smoking until I forgot everything around me. But neither was an option. I needed to stay sober enough to get Emma back to the hotel, and she didn’t like it when I smoked because it had killed our grandfather and would soon kill Father.

“She’s going to raise Falcone’s child?”

I didn’t get a reply. I couldn’t understand how Serafina could even consider raising his child. That she didn’t want an abortion was something I could comprehend. But actually watching Remo’s child grow up after what he did? That was insanity. Women got sentimental when they were pregnant. Maybe she’d change her mind later.

It shouldn’t even matter to me. Serafina wasn’t my business anymore. And yet, it still felt as if she were, as if everything that had happened to her would still fall back on me.

It was a prideful thing to consider, but I was unable to abandon the thought.

I’d been so excited when I’d heard that Danilo would be coming to Uncle Dante’s Christmas party. When he hadn’t attended Dad’s birthday party, I’d been disappointed. I wanted to see him again now that he was mine. Few people knew about our engagement yet—which wasn’t even an official engagement. That party would only happen when I was older.

My excitement faded when I met Danilo at the party. I’d taken longer than ever before to get ready. I’d chosen a new elegant dress, and I’d even put on a hint of makeup I’d snuck out of Fina’s room. Despite my efforts, Danilo hardly looked at me. It was as if I were air. His expression was passive. The only time there was a flicker of passion was when he spotted Serafina across the room. After that, I was invisible to him. Anna nudged me once he left.

“Hey, don’t pull such a face,” she whispered then turned back to Emma. I forced my eyes away from Danilo and smiled at Emma.

“Are you hungry?” I asked. “I haven’t checked out the buffet yet. Maybe we can do it together.”

She nodded and smiled shyly.

Anna grinned. “Finally. I’m starving.”

Anna walked ahead, parting the crowd so Emma could wheel through them. It was obvious that Emma was embarrassed by the attention, so I stayed by her side and distracted her with chitchat.

“I’m happy that you’re going to marry my brother,” she said a little later when we stood in a corner of the room, eating.

That surprised me. “You are?” I cringed at how eager I sounded. Like a puppy desperate for a treat.

“We’re close in age, so we can be friends.”

“We’re already friends,” I said. Emma and I weren’t as close as I was with Anna or my friends from school because I didn’t see her as often, but I liked her. After her accident, I hadn’t been sure how to treat her, but I’d soon realized that she was still the same girl from before, only less mobile.

Emma’s eyes darted to something behind me. I turned. Danilo was heading our way again, a drink in his hand. I straightened and smiled in that sophisticated way Fina had perfected. His gaze passed me by before settling on Emma. “I see you’re taken care of. Will you be okay while I take care of business?”

Emma nodded. “Of course. I’m not a baby.”

The smile Danilo gave her was unguarded. It was the first time his face looked completely free of control. Usually, he was always so poised and aware of his surroundings. I wanted him to lower his guard around me as well.

With the briefest nod at me, he slipped away.

Anna leaned toward me, a strand of her brown hair falling out of her updo. “Stop giving him those puppy-dog eyes.”

I frowned. “I’m not—” I *had* been giving him puppy-dog eyes. “I just wish he’d stop ignoring me.”

Anna shrugged. “He has to ignore you in public. Until you’re older, it’s against etiquette to show that you’re engaged.”

She was right. I kept comparing my situation to how Danilo had treated my sister, but she’d been older, and they’d been almost married.

I promised myself to stop fretting so much about everything.

Serafina and I sat on the porch, enjoying the warm spring day. Fina's belly was already bulging. She looked as if she were ready to burst. She'd explained that her belly was bigger because she was expecting twins. I simply couldn't believe she had two little humans inside of her.

She laughed when she noticed my attention. "Don't worry. I won't explode even if I feel like it."

"I can't wait to meet the twins." I giggled.

Her smile wavered. "At least someone does."

I linked our fingers. "Mom and Dad still aren't happy about the babies?"

Fina looked away, biting her lower lip. She didn't say anything, but I could tell she was holding back tears. Ever since she'd become pregnant, her emotions were all over the place. That was why I never talked about Danilo with her, even though I was desperate to ask her about him.

Dad stepped onto the porch. "Sofia, can I have a quick word with you?"

I got up, surprised that he wanted to talk to me. Was it about Danilo? I followed him inside and we settled on the sofa.

His expression told me that I was about to hear bad news.

"Ladybug, I know you were excited about celebrating your birthday, but given Fina's situation, your mother and I decided it would be best to cancel the party."

My heart sank. I'd been looking forward to my twelfth birthday party with my friends. "Okay."

Dad stroked my head. "I'm sorry. But you understand we can't have so many people around right now, do you?"

I nodded mechanically. My parents were trying to hide Serafina from the public as much as possible. I wasn’t sure why they were still bothering. Even at school everyone knew about her pregnancy.

“But Anna and her family will come visit, so you’ll get to spend your birthday with her,” Dad said.

I could see how bad he felt, and I didn’t want to make him feel even guiltier by showing my sadness, so I grinned and hugged him. “Don’t worry, Dad. It’s okay.” When I kissed his cheek, it was like a weight lifting from his shoulders.

Anna and her family arrived the day before my birthday.

On the day of my birthday, Mom baked a big chocolate cake for me and made too much frosting as usual because I loved eating it with a spoon while the cake baked in the oven. Leonas, Anna, and I spent the day together, stuffing ourselves with cake and homemade tagliatelle with ragù—a traditional dish from our cook’s hometown Bologna. I finally got a cellphone, and even though Danilo didn’t have my number yet, I kept hoping I’d get a text from him. It wouldn’t be difficult for him to find out my number—all he’d have to do was ask Dad or Samuel. But when dinner rolled by and I hadn’t received a message from him yet, I accepted that he’d forgotten my birthday. My disappointment weighed heavily on me, but I tried to hide it from my family. I didn’t want them to realize how crazy I was being about Danilo.

After dinner, Anna and I moved to my room and lounged on my bed to watch movies and stay up for as long as possible.

As usual, Anna read my mood. “He probably just forgot. Men are like that,” Anna said during the opening credits.

“How do you know so much about men?” I scoffed.

Anna rolled her eyes. “I have a brother, and he can be a major douche. I doubt he’ll improve with age. What about Sam? Does he always remember birthdays?”

I shook my head. “Fina always has to remind him about Mom’s birthday and Mother’s Day.” I grinned, suddenly feeling better. “You’re right. Let’s enjoy the movie.”

After breakfast the next day, Sam waved me over to him, holding his phone out. “Danilo.” There was an edge to his voice that I didn’t understand, but I was too eager to talk to Danilo to give it any thought.

“Hi,” I said shyly. My skin heated when I noticed my family staring at me. I turned around and walked out of the dining room for some privacy.

“Hello, Sofia. I’m just calling to wish you a happy birthday. I had a busy day yesterday or I would have called.”

I smiled. “Don’t worry, it’s okay.” I was delighted at how smooth my voice sounded, as if I weren’t nervous at all.

“I hope you had a good day.”

“Yes, I did. Umm . . . I got a cellphone.”

I hoped he’d ask for my number.

“That’s nice.”

“I could give you my number in case you need to reach me.” Nothing smooth about my voice now. I sounded like a dork.

Danilo cleared his throat. “That wouldn’t be appropriate. If I need to reach you, I’ll give your father or brother a call.”

My stomach dropped and heat blasted my cheeks. “You’re right,” I pressed out.

There was a moment of silence before Danilo said, “I have a meeting now. Have a good day.”

“You, too.”

When the call ended, I kept the phone pressed to my ear for a couple of heartbeats before I finally lowered it and

looked up.

Fina stood in the doorway to the dining room, frowning as she watched me. “Are you okay?”

I desperately wanted to talk to someone. In the past, that someone would have been my sister, but now a barrier had sprung up between us. It wasn’t Fina’s fault. She still tried to talk to me often, but it felt awkward sharing my silly feelings for her ex-fiancé with her. Especially considering how much she had to deal with right now. She’d soon be a single mom to two babies. My problems were absolutely ridiculous in comparison.

“Yes, Danilo wished me a happy birthday.” I bit my lip. “Did he ever congratulate you a day late?”

Fina walked toward me, though it was more of a waddle because of her giant belly. “I don’t remember.” She touched my shoulder, her eyes searching mine.

I wondered if she really didn’t remember or if she simply said it not to hurt my feelings.

“Maybe it would be best if you forgot about your engagement to Danilo until you’re a bit older? You still have many years before you have to marry him. Have fun with your friends until then, and just don’t think about him.”

I wanted to do what she said, but my brain seemed to have short-circuited and all my thoughts revolved around Danilo.

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THREE

I'd taken Fina's words to heart and forced my thoughts away from Danilo whenever they'd returned to him. I'd been successful, mostly due to the fact that I hadn't seen him in months. The birth of my niece and nephew seven months ago had also helped. Two babies needed plenty of attention, and Fina was happy to have any kind of help she got. Because of all the time we spent together, we'd grown closer again.

It was early December when the sound of footstep woke me up and drew me out of my room. Fina stood in the hallway, both twins in carriers and a backpack on her back.

She looked up. Shock flashed across her face as if I'd caught her in the act. It was late, so she couldn't have any appointments with the twins. Mom was already asleep, and Dad, Sam, and Uncle Dante were busy. Of course, nobody had bothered telling me what kind of business they had to conduct—not that they ever did, but the level of secrecy they'd all kept made it clear that whatever it was, it was important.

The moment Fina's eyes met mine, I knew something was wrong.

“Where are you going?” I asked, my heart clenching tightly. Fina looked like she was about to run away.

Fina’s expression softened. “I’m leaving. I have to.”

I hadn’t expected Fina to tell me the truth. My parents and Sam usually gave me a sugarcoated version of events.

“Because of Greta and Nevio?” I stopped beside my sister. Both Nevio and Greta were asleep in their carrier, looking tiny and adorable. I loved cuddling them. “You’re leaving us,” I whispered, realizing I might never see them again. If Fina ran away, I wouldn’t be allowed to see her.

“I have to, ladybug. For my babies. I want them to be safe and happy. I need to protect them from the whispers.”

I hated the way people badmouthed the twins. They were only babies, but people hated them because they looked like Remo Falcone, the enemy. I leaned down and kissed their chubby cheeks for the last time. I wanted Fina to be happy, and she hadn’t been since before the twins were born. Everyone always stared at her as if she were an alien. Still, the idea of losing Fina and the twins cut me deeply.

“I know what people say about the twins, and I hate it. But I don’t want you to go . . .” My voice broke.

“I know. Give me a hug.”

I hugged her tightly, trying to memorize everything about her. Her crisp Calvin Klein perfume, her smooth hair, her warm hugs.

“Don’t tell anyone, please,” Fina whispered.

I pulled back. “You’re going to go back to their father?”

Fina nodded. She rarely spoke about her kidnapping, but whenever she’d mentioned Remo Falcone, she hadn’t sounded as scared as I’d expected. Sometimes, she even looked wistful, and now I knew my gut instincts had been right. “Do you love him?”

“I don’t know,” Fina said, her blonde brows pulling together.

How could she not know? But then I remembered my confusing feelings for Danilo and understood. Emotions

weren’t always black and white. “Dad won’t allow me to see you anymore, will he?” I asked, my eyes prickling with tears that I tried to hold back for Fina’s sake. I didn’t want her to feel guilty.

Fina looked away briefly, blinking rapidly. “I hope one day he’ll understand.”

I didn’t understand why Dad and Sam disliked the twins so much, but it had become more obvious every day. They hated Remo so much that they couldn’t see anything but their hate. I couldn’t imagine them ever being okay with Fina going back to Las Vegas, even if it were for love and her twins. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too. I’ll try to contact you. Remember, I love you, ladybug.”

Tears tracked down my cheeks as I watched Fina descend the staircase. I gripped the banister until I heard the soft click of the front door as Fina slipped out of the house. I wasn’t sure how Fina would get off the premises or past the guards, but she was clever and determined. She’d find a way.

I returned to bed, but I couldn’t fall back asleep. My thoughts were with Fina, wondering how she’d get to Las Vegas. I wanted her to be safe. I considered going to Anna. She, Leonas, and Valentina had spent the night here since Uncle Dante was doing business. But I’d promised Fina to keep it a secret. I trusted Anna, but I didn’t want to drag her into this mess and force her to lie to her dad.

I must have fallen asleep eventually because I was woken by angry shouts. I scrambled out of bed to investigate the reason for the shouting. My heart raced, expecting an attack. Instead, I found Mom, Dad, and Samuel facing off with Dante.

Mom was crying hysterically. I was trying to understand what was going on. Everything happened so fast, I barely had time to come to terms with what was happening. And then my parents threw Anna and her family out of our

house. I watched everything, mouth agape, heart clenching hard. Anna gave me a fearful look. I'd never seen our parents scream at each other, much less throw each other out of the door. When the door closed behind them, I suddenly realized that I might have lost Fina, the twins, and Anna all in one day.

Mom rushed upstairs, Dad following behind her. Her wails rang through the house and brought tears to my own eyes.

Sam walked toward Dad's office and I trailed behind him. He poured himself a drink and downed it, then sagged into one of the armchairs, looking disheveled and heartbroken. I crept toward him and touched his shoulder, wanting to give him comfort. He and Fina had been inseparable, and now she was gone.

"She chose him. She saved him," he gritted out, and then he told me how Fina had gone to a safe house where they'd kept Remo Falcone to kill him and she'd saved him. Dante had let her go and now my family blamed my uncle for losing Fina, but she'd made her choice to leave—not Dante. He'd only honored her wish. I didn't voice my thoughts and listened to Sam's increasingly drunk ramblings. When he mentioned Danilo, I perked up.

"Danilo was there?"

Sam nodded and staggered to his feet to grab another drink.

"Why was he there?"

Sam was already unsteady on his legs, and I wished he'd stop drinking but I couldn't tell him what to do. He snorted. "Because Danilo's been dreaming about tearing Remo fucking Falcone apart since the day he stole Fina from him. We've all been dreaming about it, about finally getting our revenge. But did we get it? Fuck no. Dante took that from us, and now Fina's gone just like any chance at revenge we ever had." He downed the drink.

I'd foolishly hoped that Danilo had gotten over losing Fina, that he'd moved on, but if revenge was still on his

mind that obviously wasn't the case. "Why can't you just move on?" I whispered. It was the question I wanted to ask Danilo.

Samuel laughed bitterly. "Move on? There's no fucking way I can just move on. I lost her, and nothing and no one could ever replace her." He slumped in his chair, looking like he was seconds away from passing out.

I knew Samuel didn't mean to hurt me, and I knew I could never replace Serafina. She and Samuel had always been a unit. They were twins. Their bond was special, and I'd always accepted it. Yet, after hearing his words, I felt crushed, knowing that the same thoughts were probably going through Danilo's mind. He'd wanted Fina, had chosen her, and now he was left with me instead. Samuel's breathing had evened out and his eyes were closed. I carefully removed the glass from his hand and put it on the table. I left him in the armchair and crept out of the room. When I arrived upstairs, I heard Mom's crying coming from their bedroom. For a couple of heartbeats, I hovered in the hallway, wondering if I should knock and try to console her.

But Mom was a private crier. She probably wanted to be alone, so I passed the room by.

That night when I lay in my bed, I allowed myself to cry.

After a moment of exhilarating euphoria yesterday when Remo Falcone had handed himself over in exchange for his younger brother we'd captured, after hours of seeing him getting tortured and torturing him myself, my mood had now hit rock bottom.

I raced through Minneapolis, not even sure where I was going. I'd waited for this day for months. I'd lost count of the times I'd imagined how to dismember Remo, how to bring him to his knees and make him beg for mercy. He did neither. Till the very end, his air of arrogance remained untouched. It didn't matter what we did to him, he kept up that arrogant smirk. Maybe if we'd gotten the chance to go through with our plan and cut his fucking dick off, he would have finally begged, but we were thwarted.

After all our struggling and effort, Remo Falcone had won. Serafina, the woman he'd kidnapped and dishonored, had saved him with Dante's help.

I'd felt an onslaught of guilt when Serafina had been kidnapped and even after she'd returned to us broken, a shadow of the girl I thought I knew. Now, anger took up more and more of my emotions, becoming almost overpowering. The instant she'd pointed her gun at us to protect her kidnapper—our worst enemy—I'd hated her. It was one thing to be born on the wrong side and to not know any better like most Camorrista, but it was unforgivable to be raised in the Outfit and defect. Woman or not. She could have sent her twins to Las Vegas and stayed where she belonged—in the Outfit.

I pulled into the parking lot of a random bar, not even sure if it was one of our own or if it belonged to the Bratva. I didn't care. I killed the engine and got out of my car.

Inside the dingy, dimly lit bar, I downed one shot after the other. The barkeeper didn't ask any questions or try to prevent me from getting dangerously shitfaced.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a blonde woman. My heart skipped a beat—for a moment, I thought it was

Serafina. I wanted to kick myself for my own idiocy. I downed the rest of my drink and thumped the glass on the counter. The barkeeper refilled my glass without a comment. Upon closer inspection, the woman down the counter from me had no resemblance with my ex-fiancée except for the similar hair color. Every inch of this woman's face spoke of a life full of hardships and frustrations. Serafina had lived in a golden cage. She'd never had to work for anything, fight for anything, and the first time she did it was to save our enemy and betray all of us.

Bitterness poisoned my insides. I was caught up in a self-destructive spiral, but I couldn't shake myself free of it.

The woman noticed my attention and smiled. She wasn't my type. Too unnatural, but she was exactly what I needed. I got up, walked over to her, and sank down on the bar stool beside her. Up close, she barely looked like Serafina, but I didn't care. After a short chat and a few more drinks, we stumbled into the restroom together. I fucked her hard against a bathroom stall, her front pressed against the wall, her back to me. I focused on her blonde hair and let out my frustration and anger. Remo had taken Serafina from me, had stolen her innocence and her heart. I could imagine his feeling of utter triumph every time he fucked her, knowing he'd taken this from me. I came with a violent shudder and untangled myself from the woman in front of me. I wasn't sure if she came, but I didn't care. She didn't look unhappy as she leaned up to me and rasped something into my ear that I didn't understand before slipping a piece of paper into my pocket. She stumbled out of the stall, and I braced myself with one arm and disposed of the condom. For a long time, I stared at the graffitied wall, feeling sick to my stomach and not sure if it was the result of too much alcohol or my tasteless fuck in a dirty restroom. I straightened my clothes and stumbled out of the restroom. After dropping money on the counter, I staggered to my car.

Once behind the steering wheel, I stared straight ahead, trying to stop my vision from spinning. I closed my eyes, considering where to go. The hotel was out of the question. My family and I had been staying at the place for as long as I could remember. I wouldn't show up there in this pitiful state. My parents had enough to deal with without worrying about my drunken escapades.

There was no way I could drive myself to another hotel or cheap motel. After what had happened with Emma, I'd never drink and drive. I didn't need to add another layer of guilt to my already heavy conscience.

Back in Indianapolis, I'd have just called Marco and asked him to give me a lift to his place. Though he'd probably be as shitfaced as me. We usually spent these kinds of shitty nights together. Eventually, I pulled out my phone and called Pietro.

He answered after the second ring, no sign of sleep in his voice, only a deep, all-consuming wariness. "Danilo, what can I do for you?"

Maybe showing weakness to another Underboss was a mistake. Pietro was one of the better men in our world, but he was still a Made Man, and keeping face in front of him was important. He wasn't the backstabbing, gossip-spreading type, and he'd also be family one day. He would already have been family, if not for Remo Falcone. The anger I'd dulled temporarily with liquor and a meaningless fling with a girl lightyears from reaching Serafina's grace erupted inside of me again, lighting up the embers of my thirst for revenge and blood.

"Danilo?" Concern now mingled with the exhaustion in Pietro's voice. Perhaps he was one of the very few people who understood my turmoil. We'd both lost something. But what he'd lost couldn't be replaced.

"I'm too drunk to drive. I'm stuck in the parking lot of some shithole bar. Can I spend the night at your house?"

“Of course,” Pietro said without hesitation. He didn’t even ask why I didn’t just return to the hotel I’d booked. “If you give me the address of the bar, I’ll pick you up.”

I nodded as if he could see it through the phone, then told him where I was. I wasn’t sure how long it would take Pietro to reach this part of the city. I’d driven aimlessly through the streets before I’d finally stopped here.

My eyes fell shut as I gave in to the heavy fog the alcohol spread in my head.

A knock at the window jerked me from sleep. I wasn’t sure how long I’d been asleep, but when I peered out of the window, Pietro stared back at me. I straightened and pushed open the door. My legs were wobbly. I’d obviously drunk even more than I’d thought. Pietro scanned me. I knew I was a pitiful sight, but he didn’t comment and wouldn’t spread gossip about me. By our standards, he was a good man.

He didn’t offer to help me as I staggered toward his car, even though I obviously could have used it, for which I was grateful. I wanted to keep a sliver of my pride.

Once I plopped down on the passenger seat, a wave of nausea washed over me, but I battled it down. I wasn’t a fifteen-year-old boy who’d overdone it at his first party. Pietro slid behind the steering wheel and started the car. He rolled down the window and lit a cigarette.

Before the thing with Serafina, I had never seen him smoke, but I supposed each of us had our own vice to deal with recent events.

We didn’t talk. I was too drunk, and Pietro, albeit not drunk, looked like he was hungover.

“Is the Capo still at your house?” I asked eventually. The note of mutiny in my tone might have caused me my head on any other day. Not that I cared.

“No, he and his family left for Chicago.”

“Home sweet home,” I muttered.

Pietro took a deep drag and nodded. Our families were in shambles for various reasons, but Dante had kept his in

perfect condition.

We arrived at Pietro's mansion fifteen minutes later. The house was dark, except for a room upstairs.

Pietro sighed.

"Your wife?" I guessed.

He nodded. He'd never been very talkative, but now he seemed to have become selectively mute.

"What about Samuel?" I asked. I wasn't sure why I couldn't just shut up.

Pietro took a final drag from his cigarette, stomped in on the ground, and led me toward the front door. "He lost his twin."

It wasn't much of an answer, but at the same time it was. Samuel and I weren't exactly friends. Our personalities clashed too much to like being around each other, but I respected him. I'd lost my fiancée—my future wife—when Remo had kidnapped her and had gotten Sofia as a replacement. For Samuel, there wouldn't be someone else who could take his twin's place.

Pietro led me to one of their guestrooms on the second floor, then excused himself.

I dropped down on the bed, shoving my shoes off and not bothering to undress. Seconds after my body hit the mattress, I passed out.

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FOUR

I stumbled downstairs, still in my nightgown. Yawning, I stepped into the dining room, which smelled of coffee and pancakes. Our maid Adelita gave me a quick smile before she rushed back out, probably to get whatever was still missing. Dad was the only one sitting at the table, which was unusual enough. Usually Mom was always up early and the first to make sure the breakfast table included all our favorites—especially on the weekend.

“Good morning,” I said, my voice rough from sleep and crying.

Dad looked up from behind his newspaper. Dark shadows spread below his eyes, and when I kissed his cheek, the stench of smoke drifted into my nose.

“Are you smoking again?” I asked, worried. “That’s not healthy.”

Dad gave me a small smile, then he scanned my outfit. “Maybe you should get dressed.”

My brows furrowed. “It’s the weekend.”

“Danilo spent the night. He might be down any moment, and I’m sure you don’t want to be in your nightclothes around him.”

My eyes widened in surprise. “Why is he here?”

Dad looked down at his newspaper. If he was reluctant to tell me, it could only be about Fina. “He wasn’t doing so well after your sister helped Remo escape, so I picked him up last night and let him spend the night.”

I nodded, my eyes beginning to prickle. “Of course. Umm . . . I’ll get dressed now.” I stepped back and headed back out.

I’d thought Danilo was over Fina, but if Dad had to pick him up, he must have been very drunk—like Samuel.

Lost in my thoughts, I trudged through the second-floor corridor when someone stepped out of one of the guestrooms. I noticed too late and ran right into him—Danilo, of course.

He grabbed my upper arms to steady me. I glanced up, cheeks burning. Danilo was in a crinkled shirt and dark pants that smelled faintly of alcohol and smoke. Yesterday’s clothes.

His eyes were bloodshot and swirled with a myriad of dark emotions that filled my heart with dread. I’d never seen him like this. He looked heartbroken over my sister running away. It wasn’t the reaction of someone who didn’t care about her anymore.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, after all I’d almost run him over. He briefly scanned my outfit, and I cringed inwardly. This wasn’t the impression I wanted to make.

He released me and stepped back. “No need to apologize,” he said in a voice that spoke of a long night. “Is your father downstairs?”

“Yes, he is.”

I gave him a forced smile and excused myself, wanting to make myself presentable to salvage my dignity. Fina had never paraded around Danilo in childish nightclothes.

I wanted to scream in frustration, but instead I got dressed in a nice dress before I rushed back downstairs,

hoping I could make up for my first appearance, but when I stepped into the dining room, Danilo wasn't there.

Mom and Dad sat at the table, drinking coffee.

"Where's Danilo?" I asked as I settled across from Mom.

"He needed to return to Indianapolis," Dad said.

I nodded, hardly able to contain my disappointment. Mom didn't say anything. She looked exhausted, and her eyes were swollen from crying.

I reached for the pancakes and loaded a few on my plate. Adelita came in again with the last two bowls. One of them contained an assortment of berries, the other grapefruit slices. My stomach became a hollow pit at the sight of the perfect pink halfmoons.

Fina was the only one who loved grapefruit.

Mom and Dad must have thought the exact same thing because their faces fell when Adelita set the bowl down.

"You can throw that away," Mom said sharply.

She never talked to the staff like that, not even when she was stressed. Adelita jumped, then realization filled her face. By now, our staff would know about Fina. News like that spread like wildfire. My heart felt heavy at my sister's disappearance. By now, she'd be in Las Vegas with the twins, in enemy territory. Would I ever get the chance to talk to her again? To see her again?

Adelita reached for the bowl, but I stopped her and pulled it over to me. "Don't worry. I'm in the mood for grapefruit this morning."

Adelita nodded slowly before she left the room, looking as shaken as I felt. Mom took a sip of coffee, her fingers white from their tight grip on the cup.

Dad looked back down to his newspaper, but not before giving me a small, grateful smile.

I speared a slice of grapefruit and slid it into my mouth. The bittersweet taste bloomed on my tongue, and I had to stop myself from grimacing. After a few more bites, my taste buds got used to the bitterness, and I finished the rest

of the fruit. Mom briefly glanced up before she filled her cup with coffee again. I was the only one eating.

“Have you seen Samuel?” I asked eventually, unable to bear the crushing silence a second longer.

Mom shook her head. It seemed as if the small movement cost her too much energy already.

Dad put down his newspaper. “He was still sleeping the last time I checked.”

“He was pretty drunk—”

Dad shook his head. “He shouldn’t be drunk in front of you.”

I shrugged. I wasn’t a baby anymore. Since Fina’s kidnapping, I’d seen so many disturbing things that I wasn’t as easily shaken.

“I think I’ll go looking for him,” I said, waiting for Dad to give his okay. He nodded and I stood from the table. I poured a coffee for Samuel and grabbed a pastry before I headed upstairs. It was silent behind his door. I knocked a few times, but there was no sound behind the door. Eventually, worry overcame me. Drunk people could choke on their own vomit. What if something like that had happened to Samuel?

I opened the door an inch and peeked in. The bed was untouched. Samuel definitely hadn’t slept here last night. I turned and moved downstairs to the office where I’d left Samuel last night. When I stepped inside, my stomach tightened.

Samuel lay on the floor, an empty bottle of Scotch beside him. I set the cup and pastry down on the side table, then fell to my knees beside him, worried that he might not be breathing. My eyes registered the rise and fall of his chest. He stank of alcohol. I shook him hard. “Sam? Wake up.”

It took a few moments before his eyes peeled open, and he looked at me. He was squinting as if the light was blinding him.

“What’s going on?” he grunted, sending another wave of alcohol stench to my nose.

I leaned back slightly. “You slept on the floor. You must have been very drunk.”

With a groan, he pushed himself into a sitting position. He cradled the side of his head, his face scrunching up in pain. “Fuck. What—”

Realization crossed his expression, as if he remembered yesterday’s events. He quickly masked his anguish and looked at me. “What are you doing here?”

“I was worried about you,” I said. “And I brought you coffee.” I got up and grabbed the coffee and pastry. “I think it might be cold by now. I didn’t know you were down here.”

Samuel took the cup from me. “Thanks, Sofia. You’re a lifesaver.”

He downed the coffee in two gulps, then let out a sigh and leaned back against the sofa but didn’t bother getting up from the floor.

“Do you want me to get you another coffee?”

He chuckled. “I must look like shit.”

I bit my lip. “You don’t look good.”

“You’re too nice,” he said, then his expression softened. I handed him the pastry and went to get him more coffee.

I wanted to help Samuel. It distracted me from everything that had happened and made me feel useful. When I stepped into the dining room, Mom and Dad were already gone and Adelita was clearing the table.

“Is there more coffee?” I asked.

She looked up in surprise.

“For Samuel,” I clarified.

She smiled, but the pity in her eyes almost undid me. I’d learned from an early age that pity was something undesirable. Pity was gifted but everything worth receiving had to be deserved.

“I can make fresh coffee.”

“Yes, please,” I said. Grabbing a few plates, I followed her into the kitchen.

“You don’t need to help me. That’s my job,” Adelita said as she took the plates from me and put them in the dishwasher.

I watched her prepare the coffee. Our second maid busied herself cleaning a pan, but she slanted me a curious look.

“Is Samuel hungover?” Adelita asked.

My defenses shot up. Our maids practically lived in the house, so it was only natural that they witnessed a lot but revealing Samuel’s vulnerability still felt wrong.

“He’s doing fine. He just wants some fresh coffee.”

I was relieved when I left the kitchen five minutes later with a pot of steaming coffee. Samuel hadn’t moved from his spot on the floor, but at least he’d eaten the pastry.

His expression smoothed when he spotted me, but I’d already seen the darkness.

I poured him some coffee, and he took a gulp, hissing at the scorching heat.

I sank down on the floor beside him, wondering what to say. Samuel had been more closed off since Fina’s kidnapping, and now that she’d run off, it probably wouldn’t change.

For a few minutes, we sat in silence, Samuel cradling his coffee and me lost in my thoughts. Eventually, I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Do you think we’ll see Fina again?”

Samuel stiffened. “She betrayed us. She drugged me so she could save Falcone.” He fell silent but his harsh expression told me more than his words.

“She did it for the twins. Nobody liked them here in the Outfit.”

Samuel grunted. “She could have sent them to Vegas.”

“Do you really think Fina could have lived without her babies?”

But Samuel wasn’t in a state of mind to listen to reason.

“What happens now?” I asked.

Samuel shrugged. “We’ll move on. Serafina’s gone, and we won’t try to get her back this time. Maybe she’ll come running back to us one day once she realizes what kind of madman Remo Falcone is.”

“Would the Outfit take her back?”

Samuel looked away, and despite his anger and sense of betrayal, his eyes told a clear answer. “She’s a woman,” was what he said instead.

“Maybe one day there’ll be peace with the Camorra.”

Samuel shoved to his feet. “There won’t be peace unless Dante wants a mutiny at his hands. Danilo, Dad, and I would never agree, and knowing many of the future

Underbosses, I doubt they want peace. We don’t need it.”

When I stood, Samuel touched my shoulder. “Don’t worry about the war. Just try to be happy and be a kid, Sofia.”

I forced a smile. “Our family needs me to be a grownup, and now that I’m promised to Danilo, I can’t be a kid.”

“You can put Danilo out of your mind for the next six years, ladybug. Our family will heal on its own. You can’t mend what Remo and Serafina have broken.”

He squeezed my shoulder before he left.

Maybe he was right, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to put my mind to rest. I wanted to mend our family and show Danilo that he made the right choice.

My headache still thrummed against my temples as I steered my car toward my parents' home. After my short night at the Mione's mansion, I'd retrieved my car and driven to the hotel to change my clothes and pick up my bag. I'd been on the road back to Indianapolis ever since. My body screamed to lie down, but a message from Mother had me driving to them instead.

When I let myself in with my keys, Emma wheeled herself into the foyer. "I heard your car," she said softly. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying. Despite her obvious distress, she scanned my face and said, "You don't look good. Is everything all right?"

Word about Serafina helping Remo escape hadn't reached my parents' home yet. I doubted that it wasn't making the rounds among my men, though.

I kissed her cheek with a strained smile. "Things have been strenuous in Minneapolis, but let's not worry about it now." That was putting it mildly. Shit would hit the fan very soon, and my men's frustration and anger over the enemy's coup would hit me even if Dante had made the decision. A few would test my authority, and I'd have to show strength. More energy wasted in the wrong direction.

"Mom and Dad are upstairs," Emma said, then whispered, "Dad's been really bad these last few days. I think . . . I don't think he'll make it to Christmas." Her voice hitched and she covered her face with her hands.

I squeezed her shoulder. “He’s recovered before.” He’d had a few bad episodes that had been followed by weeks of better health, but overall, his body had deteriorated. I went upstairs. The door to my parents’ bedroom was open and I stepped in without knocking. Dad lay in the center of the massive king bed, looking like a skeleton—a broken, wilted body only anchored in this world by his sheer force of will.

Mom stepped out of the bathroom, wiping at blood splatters on her white silk blouse. Her skin was pale, her brown eyes red. She jumped when she spotted me and slowly let the hand clutching the washcloth sink to her side. Her brown hair was a mess, her usually elegant chignon tousled, with strands falling out of it.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Your father had a coughing fit,” she said tonelessly, then with a strange smile. “I think my blouse is ruined.”

I went over to her and set a comforting had on her shoulder. “When was the last time you slept?”

She shook her head as if the question was irrelevant. “Your dad needs me. He needs my full attention to get better.”

I looked back at the bed. I had little hope that Dad would get better. Maybe he’d cling to life—whatever was left of it—for a few more weeks, but his death wasn’t far off. Emma’s words could prove right. The weeks until Christmas seemed an insurmountable distance for the man lying in the bed.

Thinking of the weeks ahead, a sense of bone-deep exhaustion overcame me. My father’s death and the inevitable upcoming uproar in the Outfit would require all my energy.

“How . . .” The broken word from Father’s cracked lips made us jump. She rushed over to him and dabbed his mouth with a wet cloth. His glassy eyes focused on me. I sank down on a chair beside the bed and leaned forward to understand him.

“How did it go?” Every word tore from his body in a painful rattle, and my own chest ached just imagining his struggle.

I had a millisecond to decide what to say. “It went well,” I said, choosing the lie. Father didn’t talk to anyone outside of the family because he didn’t want to show weakness in front of others. He wanted them to remember him as the strong leader he used to be. That meant the truth about the Remo Falcone debacle wouldn’t reach his ears if I talked to a few key people and made sure they kept their mouths shut.

His eyes flickered with excitement.

“We tortured him to death. It took us two days, but in the end, he begged for mercy. We cut his dick off and ended his miserable life.” As I uttered the words, my own frustration flooded me again. For so long, I’d worked towards the ultimate goal to ruin Remo, and it had all been for nothing.

Father nodded. “They . . . they all do. Did you do the honors?”

“I did.” The lies flowed easily from my lips, maybe because they were easier to stomach than the truth. I still had trouble accepting that Remo was back in Las Vegas, that he’d be going on with his life, and not just that . . . he had Serafina to parade around as his triumph over the Outfit.

“Maybe the girl can move on now. If she sends those kids to a boarding school far away, people will eventually forget they exist,” Mother added.

I swallowed my bitterness. Serafina had moved on, but no one in the Outfit would forget about the black-haired Falcone spawns any time soon, nor about the events that created them.

Father watched me closely, and I quickly masked my feelings. Of course, he caught on to my troubles. He was too good at reading people. “Are you still hung up on the girl?”

Gritting my teeth, I shook my head. I wasn’t sure what I felt anymore. Until a few days ago, I’d felt a strange sense

of longing whenever I'd seen Serafina or just thought of her, but after what she did . . . my feelings had done a U-turn.

Marco had a very peculiar opinion about women. He said they were all opportunists at heart, easy to sway toward whatever direction suited them best. They chose the option that brought the biggest advantage. I'd always considered his musings the result of his bitterness toward his mother. Now, I wasn't so sure. Surely, not all women were that way? But in our world, many chose their own advantage over loyalty.

Serafina had chosen a life at the side of a Capo, in the spotlight, with her children as successors to the Camorra throne. She'd just as quickly come running back to the Outfit once she realized that Remo Falcone wasn't fit to be a father, that he didn't share his throne. Women meant nothing to that madman.

"I have to say I'm happy Sofia is going to become a Mancini. She's more down-to-earth, easier to control. She'll give you less trouble than her older sister," Mother said.

I wasn't sure what Sofia was. I didn't know her, and I wasn't sure I had it in me to change that any time soon. I'd had enough of the Mione women for the time being. The problems arising before me were plenty. Getting to know my soon-fiancée wasn't a priority.

Father clung to life until Christmas. He was too weak to eat downstairs in the dining room, so we took our plates upstairs to share a meal with him. Emma had decorated the windowsill and headboard with tinsel and baubles to give the room a less depressing atmosphere.

Emma talked about her new hobby—pottery, a way to pass her time now that she couldn't do ballet anymore. Mom and I kept up the conversation with tidbits of our daily life and gossip making the rounds. Father was too weak to speak more than a couple of words, but he listened, his chest rattling with every breath. The worst thing about his broken state was that he was still fully there in that broken body, his eyes alert and hungry for life, but his body unable to go on.

The days that followed the Christmas holidays dragged on, with Father getting worse every day. Walking into his room became harder every time. I didn't want to see him so lifeless and weak, I wanted to create a bubble of denial similar to what I'd felt when I'd visited Emma in the hospital after her accident. But denial didn't alter the truth.

On the last day of the year, I entered the master bedroom and found Father gasping for breath, his face scrunched up in pain with Mother bent over him, crying. She glanced at me. "I don't know how to help him. I just don't know."

Father's eyes met mine. "She . . . needs . . . to rest." He coughed, moaning in agony as he did.

I grabbed Mom's arm and led her out. "Lie down on the sofa. You need to rest." She didn't protest. She wrapped her arms around me. "You and your father are so strong. Emma and I'd be lost without you."

I nodded, then gently pried her arms off me and returned to the bedroom, closing the door. Dad slumped in the bed, every ounce of tension leaving his muscles and the determination in his face with it.

"Danilo," he croaked. I stepped up to the bed, shocked to see tears on his cheeks. His shoulders began to shake, his coughs mingling with sobs. I tensed, unsure what to do. I'd never seen my father like that. He'd taught me to hide emotions, especially tears. It was weakness, and here he was sobbing like a child.

I clutched his hand. “It’s okay.” The words were meaningless, but I was at a loss how to brave Father’s despair.

“I’m scared to die.”

I sank down on the edge of the bed. “You’ve faced death so often.”

“Not like this, never like this.”

Listening to his croaked words pained me. His hand shook in mine, his eyes begging me to help him, but there was only one way to ease his suffering at this point.

I wasn’t ready for that step yet, neither was he.

“What if death is the end? What if it isn’t? I’m a sinner. There’s nothing ahead of me to find absolution.”

I squeezed his hand. God had played an abstract role in our lives. We’d gone to church on Sundays because our men were religious and it was expected, but Father and I had never given much of our time or thoughts toward faith. “Whatever lies ahead, you’ll conquer it, Dad. You are strong.”

“I was. I’m not anymore.” He closed his eyes and cried silently.

I stayed at his side, not saying anything, unable to comfort him, barely able to see him as the shadow of the man he used to be.

A few minutes after midnight, my father died surrounded by Mom, Emma, and me. Emma had insisted on being present, even if I’d been wary of letting her stay.

Their sadness filled the room like their sobbing and crying. I stood by the wall, a bystander to their open

anguish. Deep down, the turmoil they showed openly tortured me, but my stoic outer mask remained unperturbed. Mom and Emma needed me to be strong, to be their rock in these unsteady times. It was my task in life. My duty.

I balled my hands into fists in my pockets, the only outward sign of the fiery mix of emotions burning up inside me. Sadness and fury had mixed with the dark emotions that had built over many months, and were now joined by newer, darker emotions, creating a potent mix that threatened to unravel me.

After the morgue had taken Father's body and I'd made all the necessary arrangements, I left the house. It was almost five in the morning, and my mother and sister had finally succumbed to sleep. I was wide awake. I'd suppressed too many emotions in the last year. I needed an outlet, a reprieve from my controlled self.

I drove to one of the clubs Marco's family managed. It was the best place in the city if you wanted a good time and had the necessary funds.

The guestlist was exclusive, and you could only get through the door if your name was on the list. The bouncers let me pass without a word. Before I could settle at the bar, Marco appeared at my side. "I heard," he said.

I nodded, ordered a drink, and downed it. "I need to take my mind off things."

I wasn't usually a customer in our establishments. Sex for money had never appealed to me. But I was hollow inside, too empty to put any effort into a possible distraction.

Marco considered me. "I have someone in mind for you. Go to Suite Three. I'll send her up."

I got up without asking for details and went upstairs to the private rooms. The suite Marco had chosen had a Roman theme with a round bed surrounded by fake columns. I

didn’t care about the surroundings. Fuck, I didn’t care about anything right now.

The door opened and a tall woman with long blonde hair stepped in. She was dressed in a white wrap dress matching the theme of the room. In my exhausted, half-drunk state, she looked like a bad replica of Serafina.

Fuck Marco, the bastard. He could read me like an open book. Only her seductive smile and her sexy movements betrayed her true identity. Accepting her was admitting weakness; sending her back would send the same message. Either way, I was a fucking mess.

“What do you want?” she said in a beckoning voice.

“No talking,” I growled, jerking her against me. “Now suck my cock.”

She fell to her knees and I tilted my head back, staring up at the ceiling adorned with ancient Roman mosaics. I didn’t look at her as she sucked me, didn’t look at her as I fucked her. Images of another blonde woman entered my mind, and my thrusts turned almost vicious as the prostitute knelt before me, but the images were distorted, clouded with bitterness and a sickening need for revenge.

Satisfaction didn’t settle in me even when I came. All that filled me was a sense of defeat.

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FIVE

More than three years later

I couldn’t remember when exactly I saw the first photo of Danilo with a blonde girl at his side. It happened a few months ago, shortly after New Year. I’d been perusing Indianapolis newspaper websites to familiarize myself with my future home, and if I was being honest, to feel closer to my fiancé. My heart had stuttered when the image of Danilo leaving a club with a tall blonde woman had mocked me from my laptop screen. Who was she? Was she the reason he rarely contacted me? Had she taken Serafina’s place in his heart?

My mind had been going a hundred miles per hour. I couldn’t ask Samuel or my parents about it, so I’d done what I always did—I called Anna, asking her for advice.

She’d talked me off the ledge, and the next morning she’d sent me more articles, pieces that had obviously been taken down shortly after their publication, and all of them had pictures of Danilo with blonde girls. Nobody had taken Serafina’s place in Danilo’s heart. With every new conquest, he seemed to look for a replica of her. For the first time, a

flicker of anger mingled with my usual feelings of inadequacy.

We weren’t officially engaged yet, but of course everyone in our circles knew we were promised to each other. People had been gossiping about me taking Serafina’s place for what felt like ages. Everyone seemed to mourn her loss, always comparing her ethereal beauty and blonde hair to my less angelic appearance. When I’d been younger, I hadn’t minded having Dad’s brown hair and most days I still didn’t, but sometimes I wanted nothing more than to have Mom’s blonde.

Knowing that Danilo was pursuing blonde girls to remember my sister, had hurt me the first few times, but eventually annoyance had been added to the mix. He’d obviously tried to keep his affairs hush-hush, judging by how quickly every article had been taken down. But now that I knew, the truth lodged itself in my heart like an ever-expanding black hole. Sometimes I managed to talk myself into believing that he just liked blondes and wasn’t looking for Serafina 2.0, but I knew I was lying to myself.

I hadn’t talked to anyone but Anna about my discovery in the three months since then, but my mind had been whirling with thoughts.

Tomorrow was my sixteenth birthday, and Anna and her family would arrive today to celebrate with us. Like last year, Danilo wouldn’t come to visit. I’d seen him a couple of times since he’d spent the night after Fina ran off, but we hadn’t talked more than a few words. I was torn between relief and disappointment. Maybe it was for the best that I wouldn’t have to face him until I’d gotten over his blonde-girl-addiction. But when would that ever happen?

I knew he’d send Emma and a present over for my birthday, then give me a dutiful call. My silly dreams of having a dance with him at one of our social gatherings hadn’t been fulfilled yet.

The moment the bell rang, announcing the arrival of Anna and her family, I ran out of my room, excited about seeing my best friend again. We talked every other day on the phone and messaged every day, but we only saw each other about once a month.

Mom and Dad were already in the foyer. It had taken a while for our families to find our ways back to each other after Fina ran off. I was glad that our parents had worked things out because it allowed me to see Anna. She spotted me on the staircase and grinned widely. She looked stunning in a cute plaid skirt and a plain white T-shirt emblazoned with Gucci. Whenever I saw her and admired her brown hair, I reminded myself that I had almost the same hair color, so why shouldn't I be happy with it when I loved it on her?

Leonas looked his usual bored, too-cool-for-this-world self while little Beatrice, who was only two, seemed giddy.

I rushed downstairs and hugged Anna before I greeted the rest of them. "Can we go to my room?" I asked the moment I'd fulfilled my host duties.

The look Dad gave me was scolding, but he was smiling. "All right, but dinner is in an hour."

I grabbed Anna's hand and led her toward the stairs when I noticed Bea, her blonde pigtails swinging wildly, stumbling after us.

Anna sighed in annoyance. "She's glued to my side." She turned to Valentina. "Mom, can you please take her? Sofia and I haven't seen each other in ages, we need to talk."

"You talked for over an hour on the phone yesterday," Leonas muttered.

"Who asked you, Blondie?" Anna growled.

"Anna," Dante warned but he smiled at me.

Val picked Bea up despite her loud protests, and Anna and I used our chance to run off and hide in my room. We flung ourselves on my bed. In preparation for our girl talk, I'd put chocolate, chips, and fruit on my night table to snack on.

“How are things with Santino?” I asked when we’d settled on my bed, several pillows propped up against our back and a bowl with chips between us. Even if my Danilo problem burned a hole in my head, I didn’t want to be the annoying friend who never shut up about her own issues.

Anna rolled her eyes. “He’s being annoying. He treats me like I’m a clueless kid, commanding me around as if he’s my boss. He doesn’t act like he’s working for me, but the other way around.”

“Technically, he works for your father, not for you.” I tilted my head, regarding the faint blush on Anna’s cheeks. “You like him?”

She picked at a chip. “He’s handsome but intolerable. He’s fun to piss off, though.”

I giggled. “And he’s your bodyguard. Your dad would kill him if he touched you.”

She shrugged. “I’m air for him, unless he needs to make sure I follow his security concepts.”

“I know how that feels,” I muttered. Being air for Danilo was something I should have gotten used to by now, but it still stung, especially after seeing photos of his affairs in the newspapers. My inability to not care annoyed me the most. I wished I could be cool about it and just pretend he was air until we married.

Anna turned to me, her blue eyes as keen as usual. “You still not over those photos? I hope you stopped checking the news for more images.”

My face heated. I’d promised Anna I’d stop stalking Danilo, but curiosity always got the better of me. “I just don’t get why he keeps dating those blonde girls. It’s strange.”

“He’s being a dick, and what he’s doing with them probably doesn’t qualify as dating. He should really pay closer attention to the paparazzi when he’s strolling about drunk with his bimbos.”

As usual, I became defensive when Anna attacked Danilo. “Those weren’t official photos, and we’re not together yet, so he can do what he wants. It’s my problem that I feel insecure about his actions.” I probably wouldn’t have felt half as bad about Danilo being with other girls before our marriage if every single one of his dates hadn’t been tall and blonde. They were Serafina lookalikes. None of them even had the slightest resemblance to me.

“Still,” Anna said pointedly. “It’s weird how he picks all those blonde bimbos. It’s been years. Why can’t he get over his hurt pride?”

Was it really only pride that drew Danilo to those girls? Or was it a longing to remember my sister, to have her in some way, even when she’d been stolen from him? I’d hoped that seeing her happy in her wedding photos would be the kick he needed. It had helped me. Knowing that Fina was happy with her new life had been the closure I needed to let go of her fully. I still missed her, but I’d made my peace with the distance between us. The wedding seemed to have been the turning point for Samuel as well. He wasn’t completely over losing her yet, but most days he seemed to be doing fine.

Sometimes I wondered whether Danilo pretended those girls were Serafina when he slept with them. Did he whisper sweet compliments into their ears as he held them, imagining they were my sister? Did he even utter her name?

The mere thought made me angry and sick at once.

“He just seems to prefer blondes.” I tried to sound as if it didn’t matter, but Anna knew me too well.

She glared at me. “Don’t compare yourself to Serafina. She’s gone. You’re here.”

When I’d been little, I sometimes wanted to be my sister because she was older and everyone admired her, not to mention the close bond she had with Samuel. It had been an innocent wish, like a little girl wanting to be Ariel or Cinderella, but it had recently turned into something more

obsessive. I couldn’t help but wonder if people—especially Danilo—would treat me differently if I looked more like Serafina. I still wouldn’t be her, but perhaps then people would take notice of me.

I’d scheduled a hair appointment for the next morning to test my theory. I’d told no one about my plans, not even Anna, because I knew she’d try to talk me out of it. Maybe it was a stupid idea, but there was no harm in trying.

“Isn’t that what everyone does?” I muttered.

“I don’t, and maybe you only think they do because you always do.”

I twisted a strand of my hair around my finger. Chestnut brown—a beautiful color if you regarded it strictly on its own. “How are things between you and Leonas? Still a warzone?”

Anna rolled her eyes at me at my cheap attempt to change the subject but still humored me with an answer. After that, we steered clear of the subject of Danilo.

The next morning after breakfast, Anna and I were lounging on my bed, watching a movie when a knock sounded at my door. Samuel poked his head in. “We need to leave if you want to make your hair appointment.”

He gave Anna a small nod before he left, leaving the door ajar.

“He used to be more fun,” Anna said.

“Yeah, I know.” Since Serafina had left, he’d become horribly serious and focused. The Outfit’s success was his driving force. He worked long hours and hardly took a day off.

“What are you doing with your hair?” Anna asked as she followed me into the hallway. I hesitated. I didn’t really want to tell her about my plans. I wanted to surprise everyone, but Anna’s words yesterday had left me worrying all night.

“Just cutting the ends,” I lied, avoiding Anna’s eyes but they seemed to x-ray me. I had never been a good liar, and Anna was good at detecting fibs.

“There you are!” Leonas shouted from down the lobby. “Take Bea off my hands. She’s annoying.”

Their little sister clung to Leonas’ trouser leg. She obviously wanted to be carried.

“It’s your turn,” Anna said.

“She’s cute. I’d love to babysit her,” I said.

Leonas gave me an exasperated look. “Yeah, for an hour. But she’s a little despot when she doesn’t get her will.”

“Isn’t it a bit early for the stubborn phase?” I asked as Anna and I reached the lobby. Bea kept tugging at Leonas’s pants, but Anna swooped her up and planted a fat kiss on her cheek. “Girl time.”

Bea giggled.

My stomach tightened as Serafina’s twins flashed through my mind. They were only a bit over a year older than Bea, but I hadn’t seen them and my sister in years. I missed them terribly, and I couldn’t even talk to anyone about them. The twins were red flags in my family—even Serafina’s name rarely passed anyone’s lips. Too much pain was associated with my sister’s loss. The few times I’d tried to ask Samuel if he was still in contact with Fina hadn’t gone over well. If you didn’t play close attention, it might seem like any hint of Fina and the twins had been erased from this house and our lives, but her memory lingered.

Samuel strode into the lobby, dressed in jeans, a white dress shirt, and a leather jacket. The girls in my class always went nuts when he drove me to school and picked me up. His constant pissed-off demeanor only seemed to add fuel to the fire of their ridiculous infatuation.

“Ready?” he asked.

I nodded and waved goodbye to Leonas, Bea, and Anna, then followed my brother toward his fancy sports car. He wrapped an arm protectively around my shoulders.

“You okay?” he asked in a low voice. He always asked me that question on my birthday and Christmas. He probably realized how much I missed her, but he never admitted to missing her. He rarely even uttered her name. They were twins, had been absolutely inseparable, and now she was gone.

I searched his eyes. “And you?”

He flashed me a smile. He was good at those quick smiles. “Of course, bug.”

I scrunched up my nose. I despised my shortened nickname. He did it on purpose, of course.

He opened the car door for me. “In you go.”

I plopped down and Samuel slid behind the steering wheel. When we pulled out of the driveway, Carlo’s car followed us. I’d gotten used to his constant presence over the years. In the beginning, Dad and Samuel had been annoyed that Danilo had sent his own bodyguard to keep me safe, but for me it was a tiny sign that he cared for me in some way, even if he didn’t show it otherwise. Like all men in our world, he was a control freak.

Samuel didn’t come into the hair salon with me. He, like Carlo, waited in the car. I’d told him it would take a while, but he didn’t mind and didn’t ask questions. Like most men, Samuel had no clue how much time girls spent at the hairdresser. Anna would have been suspicious if I’d told her I needed two hours. No haircut took that long. My party would start in the early evening, so I still had plenty of time.

My hairdresser smiled at me. I’d told her what I wanted to do over the phone. When she began applying the bleach, my stomach swooped. I’d never dyed my hair, never really changed my appearance. I wasn’t sure what the effect would be.

Two hours later, I stared at my reflection. For a moment, I was sure I was seeing a ghost. My hairdresser had straightened my hair and dyed it blonde, the same light golden blonde as Serafina's. I'd looked at samples of different blonde tones for close to thirty minutes before I'd settled on the right hue. My throat clogged up. With Fina's hairstyle and color, I looked like her. We had the same eye color, the same high cheekbones and narrow nose. I had a few freckles, but my makeup covered those, and I was shorter, but seated, I was Serafina's double. It was so close to the original that my heart ached, and my pulse sped up.

My hairdresser touched my shoulder when I didn't react. "I love it." The words came out sounding harsh. I wasn't sure I did. I wasn't sure what I felt at all. I'd wanted to look like Fina because she'd been what everyone had admired when she'd been around, and she was dearly missed. Danilo wanted her, or at least someone who looked like her—if his dating habits were any indication. Mom, Dad, and Samuel missed Fina, too. Maybe Danilo would finally look at me and see more than the girl who hadn't been his first choice. Still, goosebumps rose on my skin as I stared at myself. This wasn't me, and it definitely wasn't who I wanted to be. If it wouldn't have taken two hours to color it back, I would have asked my hairdresser to do it right away.

Instead, I got up, paid, and went outside. My heart pounded when I caught sight of myself in the shop window. Like a Serafina ghost.

Samuel was leaning against his car, reading something on his phone. The moment he spotted me, the color drained from his face. I froze on the sidewalk a few steps from him and gingerly touched my smooth hair. Samuel straightened slowly, but the look of shock and horror remained on his face. That wasn't exactly the reaction I'd hoped for. Surprise, yes, but this . . . this utter horror?

"What have you done?"

I shrugged, trying to play it down. I didn't want people to make a big deal out of it. I only wanted them to realize that I wasn't so different from Serafina, that I was also worthy. I wanted them to see me. Of course, now that I'd seen myself with blonde hair, I realized how stupid my plan had been. "I needed a change."

"Sofia," Samuel whispered harshly, grabbing my arm. "You—why would you want to look like . . . like Serafina?"

Tears stung my eyes, but a fierce ball of indignation and anger rose inside of me. He made it sound as if I'd sullied her memory by trying to resemble her, as if I wasn't worthy of this look. He was part of the reason why I wanted to look like Fina, and now he played clueless. Or maybe he really didn't realize how much he and everyone else mourned her absence and how little room they left for me.

I didn't want a fight with Samuel, not today. "I just wanted something different."

Samuel sighed, tearing his eyes from my hair almost painfully. He gave me a one-armed hug. He held open the door for me and we didn't say another word until we arrived back home.

Samuel's reaction was only the beginning. When we got home, things only became more awkward. Mom was the first to spot me, and she looked completely taken off guard. She froze on the last step of the staircase, a bunch of table napkins in her hand. She looked at Samuel, then back at me. I was sure she'd start crying, but then her face smoothed and she gave me a tight smile. Her grip on the banister was white-knuckled. "You colored your hair?"

She tried to sound casual, but I could tell it wasn't easy for her. I'd wanted to surprise everyone, not elicit this horrified shock. Everyone had always commented on how beautiful Serafina's hair was.

"I wanted your hair color," I said. Of course, that wasn't the reason. The look in my mother's eyes told me she knew the truth.

She nodded as she walked over to me, her eyes constantly flitting to my hair as if she needed proof to believe it. She touched my hair gingerly. “Your hair was beautiful. I already miss it.”

I searched her face, wondering if she was being honest. Did she prefer me with brown hair? Or did the blonde remind her too much of Serafina and the hurtful truth that I wasn’t her?

“Where’s Anna?” I asked. Sam’s and Mom’s reaction had made me feel self-conscious. My new appearance was meant to give me a boost, not break my self-confidence down even more.

“She’s upstairs in her guestroom. Don’t forget your guests will be there at five.”

I ran up the stairs and knocked at Anna’s door. The door opened, startling me. Leonas stood in the doorway, his eyes growing wider as he looked at me. “Whoa, what happened to you?” he blurted, staring at me as if I was an alien.

I flushed but deflected it with a casual shrug. “I changed my hair. Maybe you should consider it, too.”

He rolled his eyes and tossed his hair back. “I like my hair.”

Anna stepped up behind me. One glance at me had her pushing Leonas out of her room. “Give us some privacy. Go bug Samuel.”

“Hey!” Leonas protested but Anna dragged me inside and slammed the door in his face.

Our eyes met. I could tell right away that she wasn’t a fan of my new hairstyle. That made two of us. “What did you do?” she hissed. Her gaze traced my hair, almost as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

I touched my hair. It didn’t feel any different than before—neither did I. “I just wanted a change,” I said defensively.

Anna looked doubtful. “I thought we promised to never lie to each other.”

We'd pinky-sworn on it when we were six, and ever since we'd always told each other the truth. Anna was my confidante. With Fina gone, she was my only one. I simply couldn't talk about everything with Mom, much less with Dad or Samuel.

"It's not a lie," I muttered, then sighed. I walked over to the bed and plopped down, staring up at the ceiling. "I wanted a change, but . . ." I took a deep breath, hating to admit what had motivated me. "Everyone misses Fina so much. Since she left, there's a huge hole in our lives. I just wanted people to notice me."

Anna stretched out beside me, watching me. I kept my gaze ahead, embarrassed. "But you aren't her. Even blonde hair won't change that."

"I know," I said miserably. Samuel's and Mom's reaction had made that blatantly clear.

Anna linked our hands. "You don't need to be her. You're perfect the way you are. Don't you think your parents and Samuel would miss you just the same if you were gone? Be yourself. Eventually, the gap Serafina's disappearance left will close. Just give it time."

Would they? Samuel and Fina had shared a special bond, which was natural.

When I didn't say anything, Anna leaned over me, her face all I could see. "Or is this about Danilo?"

I shrugged again. If I kept it up, I'd dislocate my shoulder soon. "It's not *not* about him." I paused. "He's still in love with Fina. I can tell how much he's hurting because she's gone."

Anna shook her head and snorted. "He isn't in love with her. He didn't even know her. How often did they see each other? Twice a year at social functions. I bet he never saw her private side, only the official one. The one we all have to keep up for appearance's sake. But one doesn't resemble the other. Even if he had a crush on her, which I doubt, he had a crush on that perfect outward image she presented,

not her true self. And the only thing that's hurt is his pride, certainly not his heart."

"Now you're an expert on men?" I joked. Part of me thought Anna was right but Danilo's strong emotional reaction to losing Fina worried me.

"I'm an expert on the rules in our world. Danilo wanted Fina for her status and image, nothing else."

"But doesn't that make things even worse? How can I compete with a perfect image? Fina's larger than life now that she's gone. I can't fill in her shoes."

"Then don't. Don't try to replace her. Be yourself because that's enough."

"But I am her replacement, at least for Danilo," I hissed, my frustration rearing its ugly head.

Anna grimaced. "Forget about him for now. He'll get over her. By the time the two of you get married, he'll have forgotten about her."

I nodded, but I wasn't convinced. He obviously had some obsessive issues to work through. I touched my hair uncertainly. "Does it look so bad?"

"No, of course not. You look absolutely gorgeous, but you were just as gorgeous with your brown hair."

"But you looked horrified when you first saw me."

"Of course. Because I know why you did it. And that's the problem. Now that you're blonde, people will compare you even more with Fina because you gave them an opening and a reminder."

"I didn't see it like that. Maybe I should change it back?"

Anna considered that. "If you change it back right away, it might look as if you have something to hide. Knowing your hairdresser, your new hairstyle is probably already making the rounds in our circle."

Anna had a point. Most women from our world went to the same hair salon, and gossip was their main occupation. "Then I'll keep it for a while."

Anna searched my face. “Are you sure you can deal with all the backlash? People will ask questions. You’ll have to present your new hair with confidence, or people will attack even more.”

I’d never considered myself to be lacking confidence, but things had shifted since Fina’s kidnapping. I’d felt like a bystander. “I’m just so tired of always being in the shadows. I thought if I looked more like Fina, people would finally see me.”

“Trust me, being in the spotlight isn’t all it’s made out to be. If I could choose, I’d rather be someone people didn’t watch all the time. If you’re in the light, your flaws are so much more prominent, and everyone is looking for them. Everyone is waiting for a mishap. The moment I’m surrounded by people who aren’t close family, I’m not even me anymore. I’m this perfect public version everyone expects me to be. I’m public Anna, and it’s incredibly stressful to be her. So, be happy about your place in the shadows until it lasts because once you’re married to Danilo, everyone will watch your every move.” Anna took a deep breath then grimaced. “Sorry, this wasn’t meant to become a pity party for me.”

“Why not? I’ve been celebrating my own pity party excessively.” Even I was starting to grow tired of the Fina topic, but Anna was a real trooper and never complained.

We grinned at each other. Then Anna became serious again. “Just promise me that you don’t change your personality for Danilo or anyone. You are who you are, and that’s perfect.”

I hugged her, wishing I could have Anna’s strength, but maybe I’d just discover my own. “I won’t.”

The reaction to my new look ranged from open shock to exuberant praise. I lost count of the times I got told that I looked exactly like Serafina. It was always meant as a compliment, as if she was the ultimate goal, and while it was what I’d thought I wanted, it only annoyed me. Maybe

I’d secretly hoped everyone would tell me how pretty I’d been before and boost my ego, instead they crushed it. But that was my own fault.

I hoped Danilo’s reaction would at least make this ordeal worthwhile. Maybe seeing me as a blonde would finally turn the switch that would make him fall in love with me. It was a farfetched hope, and I wasn’t even sure if it was the triumph I should be hoping for. Would I really be happy if he suddenly fawned over me because of my blonde hair?

I only had to wait two more months until I’d finally find out. Two more months before our official engagement party. My heart fluttered at the thought.

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SIX

Danilo

I arrived in Minneapolis two days before the engagement party. I would have preferred to wait another year to make it official. At sixteen, Sofia was still too young, at least compared to me, but her parents insisted we make it public to prevent unpleasant rumors.

Emma, Mom, and Marco accompanied me. More than fifty guests would attend the engagement—close family and friends, as well as the other Underbosses and their families.

I met with Samuel and Pietro in their office. We had plenty to discuss, particularly regarding Samuel's engagement to my sister, who still didn't know about the deal I'd struck with the Miones or her future husband. But as always, business came first.

"I think we should convince Dante to risk another attack on Kansas City. Stefano Russo needs to follow his father's footsteps into an early grave," I said after we'd settled in the comfortable leather chairs in Pietro's office, a glass of bourbon in hand.

Samuel nodded immediately, which didn't come as a surprise. Pietro looked more thoughtful. Maybe it was his age or his more restrained disposition, but his reaction

wasn’t unexpected. If Samuel were already Underboss, I’d have Minneapolis’s support in the matter.

“I’ve thought the same,” Samuel said. “We’ve been lying too low for too long.”

Pietro swirled his drink in the tumbler, his eyes narrowed in thought. “Dante’s following a new strategy. Our businesses have been thriving these last couple of years because we weren’t wasting money and energy in useless battles with the Famiglia and Camorra.”

“It’s not all about business,” I growled. “It’s also about honor and pride. Schmoozing with politicians is a nice trick on Dante’s part to make us untouchable, but we need to make a bloody statement now and then. Our men don’t understand the political strategies. They want blood and grand gestures. We have to keep them happy as well.”

“It would certainly please them, but I get the feeling it would please you even more,” Pietro said.

I took another swig from my drink, biting back a comment. Pietro was right. Since we had to let Remo go, I felt the need to erase this feeling of unfinished business.

“Fuck, it would please all of us to fuck the Camorra over,” Samuel snapped.

Pietro didn’t deny it. “We have to think of the future. The two of you have to think about the future. Don’t let the past drag you down, no matter how messed up it was. We tried our hand at revenge and failed. We’ve got to move on and ensure the Outfit’s business keeps growing.”

Samuel and I exchanged a look. We certainly didn’t want to move on, but I doubted Samuel would go against his father.

“Perhaps we should change the subject. After all, you’re here for a far more pleasant occasion,” Pietro said.

“Indeed. Speaking of engagements, I intend to tell my sister that you are going to marry her while we’re here,” I told Samuel. “That way we can pretend the agreement was made now.”

Pietro nodded. “That sounds reasonable. Nobody will link it to the arrangement between you and Sofia.”

Samuel remained silent. He looked less than thrilled about the prospect of making anything official with my sister. “You gave your word,” I growled.

He smirked. “I’ll marry your sister, don’t worry.”

As usual, our mutual understanding ended the moment either Sofia or Emma were mentioned.

“Good. Are you going to talk to her after I tell her?”

“Of course. Do you have any preferred lies I should tell her?”

My anger rose quickly. “The same lies I’ll be telling Sofia.”

“That’s enough,” Pietro said before turning to me. “Maybe you should have a word with Sofia. It’s been a while since you saw her.”

I forced a smile and excused myself to go in search of my future wife. I hadn’t seen her in more than a year. Emma’s laughter rang out, followed by Sofia’s. It wasn’t a little girl’s laughter as I remembered, but still held the bell-like quality of her voice. I followed the sounds toward a library and froze in the doorway. A blonde girl stood by the window, long legs peeking out of a summer dress that accentuated a narrow waist. It took me a couple of heartbeats to realize the girl was Sofia. With the blonde hair and her face in profile, her resemblance to Serafina was striking and unexpectedly unpleasant. I hadn’t seen my ex-fiancée in many years and had absolutely no intention of changing that.

I stalked into the library, trying to control my rising anger and confusion. The latter in particular set my teeth on edge.

Sofia’s eyes widened and a hesitant smile brightened her face.

“Emma, can you give us a moment? I need to talk to Sofia alone.” My words were clipped.

Emma nodded and wheeled out of the room, closing the door after her.

I backed Sofia up against the wall, completely taken aback by her appearance. I hadn't seen Serafina in years and now Sofia played her doppelgänger. None of the blonde girls I'd fucked over the years had come even close to looking like my ex-fiancée and here stood my fiancée, looking like a fucking replica of her sister.

I towered over Sofia, staring down at her pale, confused face. "What have you done to your hair?" I growled. I touched her blonde strands, then cupped her face to force her to look me in the eyes. She blinked, pink lips parted, eyes wide. She had more freckles than her sister and her lower lip was plumper. Not to mention she was a bit shorter and more petite.

My sixteen-year-old fiancée.

I took a deep breath through my nose, trying to calm my racing pulse. I dropped my hand that was still touching her face and took a step back. I knew I should apologize, but that was out of the question.

"What have you done to your hair?" I repeated, unable to take my eyes off the golden hue. It wasn't just any shade of blonde, it was Serafina's.

She jutted her chin out. "I wanted a change."

"You look like a bad copy of your sister. Do you want people to badmouth your family again because of what happened?"

"I–I didn't mean it like that."

I shook my head. "People will talk at the party if you show up with blonde hair. About you, about me, about our families. I won't have it. You'll get your old color back before the party, understood?"

Sofia had Serafina's eyes. The same cool blue. And if one didn't look too closely, even their faces were very much alike. It felt as if the past was meant to repeat itself, as if fate was taunting me with my biggest failure. I'd lost one girl, but I wouldn't lose another. And I definitely didn't need a daily reminder of the most shameful day in my life.

I’d been fucking blonde girl after blonde girl for years, as if I could fuck *her* out of my system. It never worked. Any reprieve I felt was short-lived before my anger burned only brighter.

I was frozen in shock as I stared up into Danilo’s angry face.

I’d been nervous about his reaction to my new hair, but it had been more of a nervous giddiness. I’d secretly been hoping that he’d be delighted to see the similarities between Serafina and me. I hadn’t expected his fury.

He made it sound as if I’d committed blasphemy by looking like my sister, as if I was sullying the perfect image of her that he probably still harbored in his mind.

“Understood,” I said through clenched teeth, even as my throat closed up in a mixture of shame and frustration.

Some of the anger dissipated from his face, and he took another step back, clearing his throat. He was becoming the gentleman I’d only ever encountered so far. “Good,” he said quietly.

I stayed pressed to the wall. He ran a hand through his hair. “You don’t have to be scared of me. I’m . . .” He regarded me for a few heartbeats, his mouth set into a tight line.

I wasn’t really scared of him. I wasn’t even sure what I felt. A whirlwind of confusing emotions. Was he going to say he was sorry? Because I definitely deserved an apology.

“You caught me off guard. I expected to see you and not . . . not this version of you.”

This version of me. It wasn’t what he’d wanted to say. “I thought you’d like it.” The moment I uttered the words I wanted to take them back. It was such a weak thing to admit. I hated showing weakness in front of him, especially after his freak-out just now. Mom had taught me to be prideful, not this cowering, wanting-to-please-everyone slip of a girl.

“Change it back, Sofia. Before the engagement party. I don’t want photos of us together with you looking like . . . that.”

I pressed my lips together. Tears of anger and embarrassment threatened to burst forth, but I held them back.

The door opened and Samuel stepped in, his eyes narrowed. “What’s going on here?”

I could have cried from relief. I just wanted out of this situation and away from Danilo to clear my head. It was difficult to think straight with him so close.

“Nothing,” I blurted. Of course, my brother didn’t believe it. He stalked inside, his glare locking on Danilo. “The rules haven’t changed. You shouldn’t be alone with my sister before you’re married to her.”

Danilo’s smile was dangerous. “Thank you for the reminder.”

I used their alpha plays to slip out and rush upstairs. It took every ounce of self-control to call my hairdresser and ask her for a last-minute hair appointment the next day, then I burst into tears. That’s how Anna found me fifteen minutes later.

She sank down on the bed beside me, stroking my head. “Danilo didn’t like your hair?” she guessed.

“He hates it.” My throat was raw from crying, but at least the heavy feeling had turned into a small flame of indignance.

“Fuck him.”

I rolled on my side, giving Anna a bitter smile. “Language, Anna.” I mimicked Santino’s warning growl.

“What are you going to do?”

I shrugged. “I have a hair appointment tomorrow.”

Anna’s lips thinned.

“I know you would probably keep it to spite him, but I don’t want trouble on the day of my engagement. I want the party to be perfect. Pissing Danilo off will only ruin my mood as well.”

“It’s your decision, Sofia, but don’t let him push you around. It was okay to cut him slack after the thing with your sister happened, but he should be over it by now.”

“Men and their pride, you know how it is.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t get me started.”

Overnight, the small flame of indignance in my chest turned into a roaring fire. I was angry at Danilo for his reaction, but even more than that, I was absolutely furious that he was allowed to follow his blonde obsession and then dared to freak out because I’d colored my hair.

I wasn’t a very rebellious person, had never been, but I felt the need to show him that he couldn’t push me around. Maybe I was young and not Serafina, but that didn’t mean he could act like an asshole.

“Back again?” my hairdresser asked curiously. I’d colored my roots only a couple of days ago. I could already see her gossip radar springing to life.

I gave her a cheeky smile. “I’m feeling like more change.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Not back to your original hair color?”

My eyes darted to the photo of a model with a cute bob cut and bangs. I’d never had short hair, and never really considered it. “I want that haircut.”

She followed my gaze, her lips parting in surprise. “Are you sure you want me to cut so much of your hair off? It’ll take a while for it to grow back. You know how men in our world prefer long hair . . .”

“I know,” I said lightly, feeling almost high from my small act of rebellion.

My stomach did a little flip when she cut about fifteen inches off my hair, but once the blonde strands fell to the ground, it felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

When she was done, my hair reached my chin in the front and ended a bit higher in the back. I was surprised how much I liked seeing myself with bangs, even if I had to stop myself from blowing them away from my forehead. I looked cute. Better yet, I looked nothing like Fina anymore. The cut would have looked even better with brown hair but that would have to wait until my next appointment, so Danilo didn’t think I had colored it because of his order.

Samuel did a double take when I slid into the car. Still, it was better than the reaction he’d had two months ago. Now, it was more surprise, less horror.

“And?” I asked.

He looked relieved. “Better.”

I supposed that was a compliment where he came from.

Mom and Dad also looked as if a weight had been lifted off their shoulders now that I wasn’t Fina’s spitting image anymore. Dad even pulled me into a one-armed hug and pressed a kiss to my temple. “I hoped you’d dye it back to brown. I really miss your hair color, but this cut is something else, I have to give you that, ladybug.”

“Something else?”

Dad chuckled. “Well, it takes some getting used to.”

Mom touched my shoulder. “You look like a French runway model, sweetheart. Don’t expect men to understand that.”

I laughed.

“Does Danilo know?” Samuel asked.

I pursed my lips. “I didn’t think he’d be interested in my hairstyle.”

Samuel gave me a look. He’d probably gathered that Danilo’s pissed-off state the previous day had been caused by my blonde hair.

I barely slept that night, too excited about my engagement party and Danilo’s reaction to my haircut. I had a feeling he’d loathe it, especially because I defied him. While part of me still wanted to please him, my angry and frustrated side had won out.

A fact that pleased Anna immensely judging by her grin. “Your mom’s right. You look French and sophisticated, but also cute. The look would be perfect if you’d start smoking those long, stylish cigarettes.”

I snorted. “No, thank you. I don’t think a fashion statement is worth risking my health.”

Anna rolled her eyes. “I didn’t ask you to become a chain smoker. But sometimes a smoke can be a nice touch.”

“No, thank you.” I’d very rarely smelled smoke on Anna, but I’d never actually seen her smoke.

Anna helped me put my makeup on because my hands shook too much for an accurate eyelid line. I didn’t want to overdo it and end up looking like an Egyptian princess.

People would be talking about my recent hair change anyway. I didn’t want to give them additional ammunition against me. When they looked at me, I wanted them to be slack-jawed.

Once my makeup was done, Anna helped me style my hair with a straightening iron, especially my bangs since my natural curls caused some havoc. I’d chosen a rose-colored combination of a strapless bodice and a tulle skirt that flowed down to my knees like an elegant petticoat. I loved the dress and felt stunning in it, and I had to admit it looked great with my shorter hair because it accentuated my collarbones and throat.

Anna grinned when I turned around to give her a full view of my dress and the fluttering skirt.

“You look like a princess. If Danilo’s jaw doesn’t drop in awe, that’s his problem.”

I kissed her cheek. “Thank you.”

Anna slanted a look at her watch, her eyes growing wide. “Okay, time to make myself presentable.” She slipped out and I stepped up to the mirror.

I carefully touched my hair. I didn’t look like Fina anymore, and yet not like myself, either. I was caught somewhere in between, still adrift, trying to find my way back to myself. The blonde would have to go eventually.

A knock made me jump.

“Come in,” I said.

Dad stepped inside and froze when he spotted me. He shook his head as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “When did you grow up into a beautiful woman? Didn’t I tell you to stay my little girl forever?”

I laughed. “Maybe you should have locked me into a tower.”

He came over and pulled me into a hug. I took a deep breath, trying to catch a whiff of smoke. Dad had been smoking on and off since Fina’s kidnapping. He kept trying to quit but it usually never lasted longer than a few months.

“Maybe.” He pulled back, but wistfulness lingered in his gaze.

“Still two years,” I reminded him.

He touched my cheek. “I know. Now, we should really go downstairs. The first guests have arrived, and your mom is keeping them entertained with drinks and hors d’oeuvres.”

We linked arms and headed downstairs. The soft hum of conversation drifted out of our living area. It was a big space, a combination of dining and living room. The catering staff had removed most of the furniture from the room and pushed the rest to the side to make room for high tables and a buffet. Beautiful flower arrangements in pale rose and bold pink matching my dress decorated the tables.

The moment Dad and I entered the room, a hush fell over the crowd and their eyes focused on me. Mom gave me a proud smile from across the room, which made me lift my head a bit higher. She’d taught me to show strength and elegance in public, and I wanted to do just that.

Still, some of my poise wavered when my gaze landed on Danilo. He stood beside his cousin Marco, his mother, and Emma. The latter gave me the encouraging smile that I needed before I met Danilo’s eyes again. His expression was unreadable, despite his polite smile. It was the standard gentleman mask he displayed in public, but deep in his eyes I caught the hint of disapproval, maybe even anger and shock. He hadn’t expected me to defy him.

Dad squeezed my arm as he led me toward Danilo. The only one who looked less than happy about the events was Samuel. He was glaring daggers at my soon-to-be fiancé. Whatever went on between those two wasn’t my business.

When Dad and I stopped in front of Danilo, my heart was pounding. I hoped my nerves didn’t show on my face. Danilo pulled a small parcel from his pocket and met Dad’s gaze. “I’m asking for your daughter’s hand in marriage. Will you entrust her to me?”

It was the official phrasing. Your daughter’s hand. It was probably the same thing he’d said when he got engaged to my sister. He didn’t even have to change any words.

“I do,” Dad said. He and Danilo looked at me, then Dad released me.

Danilo extended his hand, palm upward. I put my hand in his and met his gaze, wishing I could read his mind. Danilo startled me when he lightly stroked his thumb over the back of my hand before he slid the engagement ring on my finger. He didn’t try to kiss me, even though I wished he would. It would have been highly inappropriate. He did, however, tug me to his side and very lightly rested his palm on my back, a sign that I was his and we’d soon belong together. Being so close to him felt good despite how angry I’d been with him. I waited for Danilo to remark on my haircut, but he remained the poised gentleman to keep up appearances.

After we’d accepted the congratulations of the other guests and they swarmed around the buffet, Danilo turned to me. “You kept the blonde.”

“I did,” I said. “I like it, but I decided on a new haircut so I wouldn’t look like a bad replica of anyone.” A hint of cattiness rang in my voice, surprising me and obviously Danilo.

His eyebrows twitched, but he simply nodded. “That’s your decision, of course. I, however, prefer you with long, brown hair.”

How could he keep up this polite act when he was obviously pissed? “You don’t deal well with change, I get that. But don’t worry, I like my brown hair better as well. I’ll change the color when I feel like it.”

His eyes narrowed. “You’re young. I might have frightened you yesterday, which is why I’m going to pretend that you didn’t act like a petulant, rude child just now, but I expect more from you.”

I blinked at him in astonishment. Maybe I had acted a tad childish, but his condescension definitely didn’t make me want to meet his expectations.

As if the matter was settled for him, his gaze moved to Samuel who gave a terse nod. I felt Danilo becoming tenser.

Dad cleared his throat, then tapped his knife against his wine glass. “We have another announcement to make. Danilo, would you?”

Danilo dropped his hand from my back and took a step forward. Confused, I raised my eyebrows at Anna, who just shrugged. Usually she got the hot news first and passed it on to me, but this time even she seemed to be clueless.

“It is with great honor that I’d like to announce that our families, the Miones and the Mancinis will further our bond. Samuel will marry my sister Emma the same summer as my wedding to Sofia takes place.”

Surprise shot through me. Samuel smiled tightly and headed over to Emma. Samuel gave them another one of his tight-lipped smiles before he put a hand on Emma’s shoulder. She was smiling brightly but it wasn’t honest. I knew because I’d learned the art of fake smiling from an early age. I didn’t understand why she wasn’t happy about marrying my brother. Samuel could be a bit of a moron, especially when emotions were concerned, but he was a good guy.

“A clever deal,” a low female voice muttered spitefully, but I couldn’t detect its source. Frowning, I turned to Danilo. He had a murderous glint in his eyes.

Now that I paid closer attention, I noticed that quite a few guests were whispering conspiratorially, thinking nobody would notice because many others were congratulating Emma and Samuel.

“The poor girl is so lucky.”

“What about him? He needs an heir.”

Danilo pressed his hand against my back, firmer than before, his eyes thunderous as he led me toward his sister

and Samuel. I understood his anger. From the whispers, everyone considered Emma lucky to have landed a match like Samuel, or any man really. They made it sound as if she were less because she was in a wheelchair.

I gave her a bright smile and leaned down to hug her. “I’m so happy for you two.”

“Thank you,” she said politely then pulled back a few inches to look into my eyes. “I’m sorry our announcement hijacked your special day.”

I laughed. “I didn’t even think about that. Don’t worry. I don’t mind.”

In fact, I was relieved the announcement had cut through the argument between Danilo and me.

I turned to Samuel and wrapped my arms around him.

I grinned. “You’ll finally settle down. Congrats.”

His expression loosened slightly. “I never thought I’d marry the same summer as you, ladybug.”

I flushed, my eyes darting to Danilo, who must have heard Samuel’s use of my embarrassing nickname. Samuel chuckled but sobered immediately when the next guest congratulated him in a less-than-honest way.

I stepped back and allowed the other guests their turn. Danilo was talking to Dad and Uncle Dante, so I snuck away toward Anna. She used the distraction to grab a flute of champagne. I clucked my tongue. “Your parents don’t want you to drink alcohol.”

She took a deliberate sip. “Hmmm . . . delicious.” She flashed me a grin.

I rolled my eyes at her. “You’ll get in trouble if they find out.”

“It’s a special day.” She nudged my shoulder. “Are you mad that they turned your engagement into a double announcement?”

Why did everyone think that? I wasn’t generally keen on being the focus of everyone’s attention, I only wished for

Danilo's attention. Or had wished for it. "No. I'm actually relieved."

Anna nodded, but her expression told me she was mulling over something else.

"What?"

"When did they decide to give Emma to Samuel?"

I shrugged. "I think Dad, Dante, Danilo, and Samuel made the arrangements yesterday. They had a meeting then."

Anna pursed her lips. "Could be. They didn't waste any time to announce it, that's for sure."

Something in her voice was off, but I didn't get the chance to ask her about it because Danilo appeared at my side. "We need to take a few photos."

I put my hand in his outstretched palm, giving a polite nod in return. Despite my best intentions to give him the cold shoulder, I felt the familiar flutter in my belly as he closed his fingers around mine. I couldn't switch my feelings off, even if Danilo wasn't quite the prince I had hoped he was. I followed him through the French doors to a spot on the terrace that had a beautiful view of the gardens.

Danilo wrapped an arm around my hip and presented my hand with the engagement ring to the camera. The photographer snapped one photo after the other. I risked a peek up at Danilo, and his eyes met mine for the briefest moment. He didn't look angry anymore. He looked almost confused. Too soon, the moment was over, and we turned back to the camera, playing the dream couple that we'd hopefully one day become.

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SEVEN

It was the last summer before I'd be married. I'd seen Danilo only once since our engagement, last December at the Cavallaro Christmas party. He'd commented on my brown hair, which almost made me regret my choice to dye it back, even if I'd missed my hair color. Apart from that, our interactions had been sparse like before, but I managed to distract myself with schoolwork and the preparations for our wedding. Most importantly, I stopped searching for articles about Danilo and his blonde conquests. In my mind, he'd stopped, and I wasn't keen on finding images that would prove me wrong. I wanted to enjoy my life without constantly worrying about Danilo.

"So, you really can't stay longer than the weekend?" I asked Samuel again as we drove along the narrow road that led to the Cavallaro lake lodge. Anna, Emma, Leonas, and I would spend a few weeks of the summer holidays up there. It was the first year Anna and I would be at the lodge without our families. Anna's younger sister was staying in Chicago with her parents, and Samuel had business to attend to, so he'd only drive me up and spend a night before returning to Minneapolis.

Danilo was driving Emma to the lodge, which was why I hadn’t chosen my usual lake style of shorts and a top. Instead, I was wearing a beautiful summer dress to impress him. He would also be spending the night before returning to Indianapolis for work.

Of course, we wouldn’t be staying in the lodge unsupervised. Anna had her bodyguard Santino with her who’d guard her and Leonas, Emma would have one of her own bodyguards, and Carlo was accompanying me. He’d barely left my side since Danilo made him my personal bodyguard years ago.

The forest finally opened up before us, giving way to the beautiful timber lodge situated next to the lake surrounded by firs. The sun was glittering on the blue water.

“I can’t wait to take a dip,” I said. The temperature was in the high nineties, and I desperately needed to cool down.

“The others probably won’t be here yet. Plenty of time to go swimming before dinner.”

I nodded, then slanted Samuel a curious look. “Are you excited about seeing Emma again?”

He’d blocked every attempt to talk about his engagement to Emma so far.

“I won’t be spending time with her. I’ll only spend the night because I don’t want to drive right back.”

“You don’t seem happy about your bond.”

Samuel let out a short laugh. “Sofia, arranged marriages aren’t about happiness, they’re for tactical purposes.”

My lips thinned. “But what kind of tactical purpose could there be? Our families will be linked through my marriage to Danilo anyway.”

“My wedding to Emma will solidify the union.”

I could tell that he wouldn’t say more. He parked the car in front of the lodge. Carlo’s car was already parked off to the side. He’d headed out two hours ago to make sure everything was in good condition. My family had a spare key

for the Cavallaro lodge, just like the Cavallaros had one for our lodge, which wasn't quite as splendid as this one.

I didn't waste any time to storm to the guestroom I usually chose and change into a bikini—a white knit piece I'd fallen in love with the second I saw it. My skin wasn't tanned enough to build a strong contrast to the pale fabric, but I was determined to work up a decent tan during our time at the lake. My hair was caught in a strange mid-length because I was trying to grow it out for my wedding updo. My bangs reached my cheekbones, so I had to put them back with pins or they'd cover my eyes, and the rest of my hair almost touched my collarbones by now. Still some way to go before I could pull off my bridal hairstyle.

When I rushed back downstairs, familiar voices reached me from the living room. I headed straight for them, finding Anna, Leonas, and Santino talking to Samuel and Carlo.

I made a beeline for Anna and threw my arms around her. When she pulled back, she nodded appreciatively. "That bikini looks hot on you. Good choice."

I grinned, flushing when I felt everyone's attention on me.

"Yep, you look like a hot piece of ass," Leonas drawled as he leaned against the back of the sofa like a goddamn king.

"Shut it," Santino growled. He sounded as if he was already at the edge of his meager patience. As usual, his furious eyes sent a shiver down my back.

Samuel walked over to Leonas and hit the back of his head. "Watch it. You're not Capo yet, so we can still kick your scrawny ass until your balls shrivel to the size of raisins."

"As if they were ever bigger than that," Anna muttered, giving Leonas a smug smile.

Santino sent her a hard look. "I don't care if you two torture each other. The only thing I care about is that you'll return to Chicago more or less alive and that you don't get on my fucking nerves."

“Our other bodyguards don’t say fuck because our mother hates the word,” Leonas butted in.

“File an official report and see if I give a fuck,” Santino said before turning to Samuel and Carlo. “I’m heading to the guard house. I’ll trust you to keep them alive.”

Carlo grunted, which was the equivalent of a yes from him.

I nudged Anna. “What’s gotten into him?” I rolled my eyes toward Santino’s broad retreating back.

“Let me change. I’ll tell you at the lake.”

“All right, but hurry. I need to cool off.”

Anna snatched her small bag. “You can carry up my luggage, Leonas. All your work-outs must be worth something, right?”

Leonas gave her the finger. “Later. I’m busy. I’m sure you’ll find one of your fifty bikinis in that ugly shopping bag you carry around.”

“It’s a Louis Vuitton shopper, you moron,” Anna said in a sing-song voice as she ran up the stairs.

I turned to Leonas. “You’re really going to carry her luggage?”

He grimaced. “Lost a bet. Don’t ask. Santino refuses to do it and so she finds new ways to bribe, coerce, or blackmail me into doing it.”

I giggled. Those two were like cat and dog sometimes.

Samuel gripped Leonas’ shoulder in what looked like a tight grip. He was still a head taller than my cousin at fourteen, but Leonas was slowly gaining some muscles, even if Anna still called him a scrawny shit often. “I want to go hunting for our dinner. How about you come along so I can keep an eye on you?”

“Cool.”

They left for the weaponry at the back of the lodge, and a few minutes later, Anna sauntered down the stairs in a dark green two-piece. Linking hands, we headed out to the lake. Sunchairs were arranged on the sundeck over the lake.

We dropped our towels on the sunchairs and flung ourselves into the water.

It was ice-cold, sending a shockwave through my body.

Bursting through the surface of the water, I coughed and giggled. Anna was laughing hysterically. We swam around a bit before we stretched out on the sundeck to warm up.

I didn’t know how much time had passed until a scratching sound woke me from a slight slumber. I sat up, blinking against the sunlight, and spotted Emma on the upper deck, looking down at us. She wheeled down the narrow path to the sundeck we lay on. I stood, unsure if she needed my help. What if her wheelchair rolled into the water?

As if she could see my uncertainty, she smiled. “I’m fine.”

Anna sat up on her sunchair.

Emma was in a bathing suit, a fact that surprised me. She arrived on the sundeck and arrested her brakes close to the edge of the boards. My eyes widened when she pushed up to her feet slowly. Her legs were shaky, and she had to grip the handles of the ladder leading into the water to steady herself. “I can stand and even walk a couple of steps with support,” she explained. “The accident crushed my spinal cord, so I have paresis.”

She let herself sink to the edge of the deck and awkwardly lowered her legs into the water.

“Did it get better over the years?” I asked.

Emma shook her head. “Paresis usually can’t be healed.”

I nodded and watched with worry as she lowered herself into the lake. Noticing Anna’s and my wide eyes, she said, “I’m a good swimmer, don’t worry.”

“Okay,” I said, then got into the water, just in case she needed help at some point, but soon Anna, Emma, and I swam around, chatting about wedding plans. Well, Emma and I chatted about them. Anna’s wedding date wasn’t scheduled yet. She’d be attending college first.

Emma acted so much freer and happier in the water, and we forgot the time.

“Girls, we’re about to barbecue the meat,” Samuel called from the upper deck where a grill was situated.

We got out of the lake and dried off, then Anna and I slowly walked up the trail to the upper deck so Emma could keep up. The sun was sinking over the forest, tinging the sky pink and orange, and I was beginning to feel cold without the rays warming my wet skin.

My belly erupted with butterflies when I spotted Danilo beside Samuel at the barbecue. It was the first time I’d seen him in a tight T-shirt and dark jeans, and he looked marvelous. Even if he’d been less of a Disney prince than I’d childishly hoped for, he was sexy.

“We shot a few rabbits,” Samuel explained but my eyes were on Danilo, who was skinning one of the small furry creatures with precision. When he was done, he looked up and his eyes locked on me. Bloody hands holding on to the knife and carcass, he scanned me from head to toe, lingering briefly on my short ponytail before his gaze wandered lower once more.

Was he checking me out?

It seemed too good to be true.

Samuel cleared his throat, and Danilo handed the skinned rabbit to him, tearing his gaze from me. Its bowels were already in a bucket at his feet.

“That’s disgusting,” Anna said.

“Don’t be such a diva,” Leonas muttered as he sauntered onto the deck, carrying plates.

I stepped up to the barbecue to be closer to Danilo, eager to coerce a reaction out of him, but he kept his eyes on the meat.

“You should get changed,” Samuel said sharply, giving me a hard look. “You need to make a salad if you want to eat more than meat.”

“So, we have to make the salad because we’re girls?” Anna asked.

“Next time you can go hunting if that’s what you want,” Samuel said.

Anna rolled her eyes, then together with Emma, we moved into the house. Emma had a room on the first floor while Anna and I had to go upstairs.

“Danilo checked you out,” Anna said.

If Anna had noticed, I hadn’t imagined it. Maybe Danilo and I were finally getting somewhere.

The dinner was a relaxed affair. The guards joined us at the big wooden table. The men, even Leonas, talked about work, while we girls chatted about our plans for the next day and the school year.

I occasionally stole a glance at Danilo, but overall, I focused on Emma and Anna. Once or twice, I thought I caught Danilo sneaking a glance at me. Anna had advised me to wear a white summer dress and let my hair airdry so it curled naturally. She insisted the wild mane looked good despite the length.

After dinner, we settled around the fire pit. It got quite fresh out here at night, and goosebumps soon covered my bare arms despite the roaring fire. I didn’t want to go inside to grab a jacket—I was enjoying myself too much. Emma had been clever enough to bring a cardigan.

I rubbed my arms, trying to warm them up a bit. Danilo got up and headed into the house. A few minutes later, he returned with two blankets, one for Anna, and one for me. I gave him a grateful smile when he handed it to me. I liked this side of him. He walked back over to his chair and sank

down. Samuel looked as if Danilo had committed a crime. Maybe he should try to act like a gentleman around Emma now and then.

Danilo caught my gaze over the flames and gave me a small smile.

My heart sped up, but I simply returned his smile. He looked relaxed, lounging in the teak chair in jeans and a tight t-shirt, beer bottle in hand, dark hair tousled. I hadn't taken Danilo for the beer-drinking kind of guy. He seemed too sophisticated, like a red wine or expensive whiskey kind of man. He looked approachable, not like the unattainable knight-in-shining-armor, the powerful Underboss. Maybe this trip was my chance to get to know the real Danilo. Our last encounter had been bumpy, but I was willing to put it in the past and move on.

"I want to take a dip," Leonas said eventually.

My eyes had been drooping by then, but the prospect of seeing Danilo without a shirt for the first time had me wide awake in a heartbeat.

"Sounds good. Maybe a creature of the lake will devour you," Samuel joked.

"We could go skinny-dipping," Anna suggested.

I looked at her in disbelief, but she was giving Santino that challenging smile she'd adopted around him.

He downed his beer. "Clothes stay on, and you two won't behave like bickering toddlers."

"I'm not a kid, Sonny," Anna muttered.

His eyes flashed. I wasn't sure why Anna loved to piss him off by using that stupid nickname, or pretty much anything else she did. It had become her favorite pastime.

Leonas got up from his chair and pulled off his shirt, then shimmied out of his pants without shame, leaving him in dark boxer shorts. “I’m going. You keep on chit-chatting.”

He ran down the path to the lower deck and catapulted himself into the black water with an ass-bomb.

Samuel sighed, but he also began to strip down to his boxer shorts before he followed Leonas into the water with a more elegant dive.

I stood, eyeing Danilo. He seemed torn on whether he should join the night swim. His eyes slanted to Emma, who was huddled in her cardigan. “I’m off to bed,” she said with a yawn. “You go ahead and take a dip. I’ll get ready to sleep.” She began wheeling toward the patio.

Anna stripped beside me, clearly giving Santino a show. He leaned back in his chair with a mildly pissed expression. I still had my bathing suit on beneath my summer dress, but Anna didn’t. She dashed toward the lake in black underwear and dived in.

“I’ll ask for a fucking pay raise once I’m back in Chicago,” Santino growled as he got up and began to undress.

I couldn’t help but giggle.

Danilo sent me a hard look I didn’t understand, as if me laughing at Santino’s joke was inappropriate. But I was momentarily distracted from this when he pulled off his shirt and slacks, leaving him in boxers. I couldn’t stop myself from admiring his six pack and muscular chest, his strong arms and the fascinating trail of dark hair disappearing in his shorts. Santino strolled down to the lower deck, leaving me alone with Danilo.

I realized I was still in my summer dress.

“Aren’t you going to take a swim?” Danilo asked. Was he waiting for me?

I quickly dragged my dress over my head, then wondered if I should cross my arms over my chest because my nipples puckered in the cold, but that would have looked awkward,

and maybe Danilo couldn’t even see that much in the dark. The fire didn’t give off that much light.

Dropping the dress on my chair, I gave Danilo a smile. “Ready to go.”

He nodded, but then his eyes briefly darted to my chest and I knew the dark wasn’t hiding enough. Luckily, it hid my blushing. Danilo and I headed down to the lower deck to the sound of splashing and shrieking from the lake at a slow pace. Anna and Leonas seemed to be involved in a water war.

Danilo got into the water first then drifted close to the deck, watching me. “Do you need help getting in?” he asked when I hesitated on the upper step of the ladder.

I shook my head. “No, it just makes me nervous that I can’t see what’s below the surface.” I moved down the ladder and sucked in a sharp breath when my toes touched the water. It was much colder than before.

“Jump. Drawing it out will only make it worse,” Samuel commented as he swam closer as well.

“Okay,” I said hesitantly. I checked that the coast was clear before I hopped into the water. My body seized up for a moment, paralyzed by the cold before my head burst through the surface. I gasped for breath.

“Are you okay?” Danilo asked.

“I’m fine,” I managed. Samuel was close behind Danilo, as if he thought I needed more than one savior. Of course, Leonas had other things in mind and thrust water into Samuel’s face. Samuel whirled around and tried to catch Leonas.

Anna winked at me, then swam closer to where Santino was floating on his back. I stared up at the beautiful night sky and let the water carry me, trying to come up with a topic to talk about with Danilo since he was still close by. He followed my gaze to the sky, and I wished, like so often in the past, that we were normal lovers and I could just swim over to him and kiss him.

Something wrapped around my ankle and I let out a startled cry, floundering wildly to get rid of whatever it was. In my panic, I swallowed water and my head sank under the surface briefly. Then an arm wrapped around me, and when I got my vision back, Danilo was at my side. “Calm down. I’m here.”

“Something grabbed my ankle.” I cringed when I realized how that sounded . . . as if a sea monster had attacked me.

“Sofia?” Samuel asked, worry ringing in his voice. I could hear him coming closer.

“I’ll handle it,” Danilo clipped, surprising me with the protective note in his voice. Then he faced me. Our faces were close because he was still holding me. I could have swum by myself now that the first wave of panic had subsided, but I didn’t say anything.

“Try to lie back and float on the surface so I can remove what’s on your leg,” Danilo instructed calmly. I nodded and slowly relaxed until my body drifted up to the surface. Even before Danilo reached for it, I recognized what had grabbed me: seaweed was wrapped around my ankle. Heat shot into my head when Danilo removed it from my leg and thrust it away.

“Sorry,” I said in embarrassment. “I’m not usually this jumpy.”

“Don’t worry.” Danilo didn’t leave my side after that, even though Samuel shot him warning looks. I wanted to smack my brother over the head. With his constant hovering, he was ruining my chance to have a moment of privacy with Danilo.

“I’m going to check on Emma,” Danilo said eventually.

“Will you be back?” I asked.

His lips twitched, then he nodded and got out of the water.

Anna swam over to me. “Nice job playing the damsel in distress, so Danilo would save you.”

I glared. “I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Well, it still worked perfectly. Say what you want, but he’s protective of you. That guy doesn’t want to lose another girl, that’s for sure.”

I grinned. Not wanting to lose me was a good start.

She nudged my shoulder. “Pretend you need to go to the toilet and intercept him on his way back. Samuel, Leonas, and Santino are talking about rifles, and I can distract them for a while.”

“And then what?”

Anna gave me a look as if I was a stupid kid. “Have you ever kissed a guy?”

“Of course not.”

“Then that’s your chance. You’ve been engaged to him for years and you’ll be married to him in less than twelve months. Get some action.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Don’t be such a goody-two-shoes. Sometimes we need to bend the rules a little to live. You just have to make sure people believe you always follow the rules.”

“All right,” I murmured then louder. “I’m heading to the bathroom.”

I climbed out of the water, grabbed my towel and headed up the path.

My heart sped up, thinking of what to say, and worse: what to do. I tried to channel my inner Anna. I’d be daring and take a risk. I wanted a reaction from him. No risk, no fun —that was pretty much her motto.

I was glad to be away from Sofia. In the past, our encounters had been mildly entertaining due to her awkwardness and crush on me. I'd watched her innocent flirting with amusement but never taken it seriously. She was a child and I couldn't imagine her as a grown-up, much less my wife. Our life together had been an abstract concept.

Already at our last encounter I'd noticed a change, and now it was impossible to ignore. I noticed Sofia, not because she deserved my attention due to our planned future together. No. I noticed her curves, her beautiful face. Sofia wasn't a kid anymore. She was a young woman with a desirable body. Now, her flirting didn't seem amusing or like a game. It felt like a promise of what would soon be in my reach, a dangerous temptation.

I wasn't a man who acted on impulse or followed his sexual drive without a second thought, but the mere fact that Sofia tempted me when she was still off-limits set my teeth on edge. I didn't enjoy this feeling of being a slave to my instincts, but when I saw Sofia's body, certain body parts definitely held more power than others.

The house was quiet and dark as I made my way toward Emma's room. I carefully opened the door and peered in. Emma was asleep, her back turned to me. She was still my little sister, still a little girl in my eyes, which was at odds with my perception of Sofia who was barely older.

I closed the door again and headed back out because I'd promised to return.

When I stepped out onto the patio, my body tensed at the sound of steps but relaxed when Sofia appeared before me. She had her towel wrapped around her shoulders, for which I was grateful.

"Are you heading to bed?"

She shook her head. "Actually, I was looking for you."

My eyebrows shot up. The way she said it raised my hackles. It was difficult to make out her face in the dim light, but I had a feeling she was flirting with me.

"Maybe we can take a walk?"

"Okay," I said slowly, not wanting to deny her even if I didn't think being away from the others was a good idea. To my brain's displeasure and my body's delight, Sofia dropped her towel on the chair then headed down the path that meandered around the house. I followed her, trying not to pay too close attention to her peach-formed ass in her tiny bikini bottoms. "Is there something specific you want to discuss with me?"

Sofia stopped and looked up at me. She appeared nervous. "I just wanted to be alone with you. We're engaged and are soon going to be married, but we've never been alone. We never really got the chance to get to know each other better."

Sofia probably meant it in a very innocent way, but I couldn't help but imagine all the ways I wanted to get to know her, especially when my gaze dipped to her erect nipples straining against the wet fabric of her bikini top. "We'll have plenty of time to get to know each other once we're married. Being alone with you like this is against our rules."

Sofia shrugged as if it didn't matter, but it did. We didn't need another scandal on our hands. The Serafina debacle had caused enough uproar.

Sofia glanced around, and then without a warning, she tugged her skimpy bikini top off, standing before me with her perky breasts and puckering nipples.

Blood roared in my ears. “What are you doing?” I growled, grabbing her arm. The motion caused her nipple to graze my skin. I released her and picked up her top, then held it out for her. “Put that back on.”

She stared at me. “I’m not a child.”

“Put your top back on,” I gritted out, keeping my eyes on her face. She’d be eighteen in a few months, and I wouldn’t fucking touch her until then. Eight long months to go.

She snatched the bikini top out of my hand and finally covered herself with it. “I bet you wouldn’t have made Serafina put it back on.”

She’d mumbled the words under her breath, so I almost missed them, but I got the gist of it. As usual, the mention of her sister made my blood boil, but I held onto my control.

I chose to ignore her comment, saying instead, “I swore to your parents not to touch you before our wedding, and I’m a man who keeps his oath.”

“But you don’t want to keep your oath?” she teased, trying to sound all flirty, but there was a darker undertone to her voice that hadn’t been there before.

What a question.

Of course, I wanted her body, but not before we’d said our vows. If things went downhill for whatever reason before our wedding day—if I got killed—Sofia would still be able to marry someone else.

I looked back toward the house, avoiding her question. On the outside, I was the epitome of control, but inside a storm was raging. In my darker hours, I’d have gladly taken Sofia up on her offer, to make her mine before someone else could take that from me. Like Remo had taken Serafina from me. Women often connected sex to emotions, especially if it was their first time. That’s why Remo had had it easy winning Serafina’s heart after he’d fucked her. I

wasn’t sure if he’d raped her or if it had been consensual like she claimed—if there’s even such a thing as consensual in a captive situation—but whatever had happened, it had made Serafina fall for him.

Sofia stepped closer and touched my arm lightly. The feel of her soft fingers against my skin felt good, but I pulled back. “Sofia,” I scolded her, trying to make her feel like a child so I could keep thinking of her as one, even if she wasn’t anymore. “You should go back to the lake.”

“Yeah, I should,” she whispered. It wasn’t what she wanted, and I could tell that she took my rebuke to heart. What had she hoped for? That I’d whisk her away to a secluded corner of the forest and kiss her, maybe even more? Though in her innocent fantasies, she probably would have stopped at kissing, making our encounter into some kind of romantic fairytale. Problem was, I didn’t want to stop there. I wanted to make her mine as soon as possible, wanted to stake my claim. But unlike Remo Falcone, I had honor and a sliver of a conscience. I’d wait until our wedding night and give Sofia the chance to make people forget the shame Serafina had brought over her family.

I waited until Sofia was out of sight before I followed her. I didn’t want to make Samuel suspicious. Of course, he narrowed his eyes at me in distrust when I appeared on the lower deck. Sofia was already back in the water and talking to Anna. I could imagine who they’d be talking about. Another reason for me to be wary. Maybe Sofia trusted Anna not to blabber to Dante or Valentina, but I didn’t want to take the risk. Dante hadn’t been my biggest fan since I’d challenged his decisions in the months after Serafina’s escape with Remo.

“Took you two awfully long to return,” Samuel said, climbing out of the lake. He stopped close in front of me. “What the fuck happened up there?” he asked in a low voice.

“Nothing,” I said with a hard smile. What happened between Sofia and me wasn’t his business. He was too pushy.

“I doubt you’d be happy if I went off into the dark woods with your sister.”

I leaned forward. “So far, you hardly notice her existence, so anything else would be a fucking improvement, Mione.”

His lips curled. “Stay away from Sofia until the wedding. Our family doesn’t need another pregnancy out of wedlock.”

“You don’t seem to have much faith in your sister.”

His eyes flashed with rage, but he didn’t say anything.

I doubted Sofia would have gone further than kissing. She sought my closeness, but she wouldn’t risk more. Yet, I understood Samuel. He’d put all his trust in his twin and she’d thrown it in his face.

“Maybe we should have another talk when we’ve calmed down,” I said eventually. I didn’t want a war between Samuel and me, especially because Emma’s well-being would soon be in his hands.

“Tomorrow morning. I want to work out at the lake. You can join me at sunrise.”

I nodded my consent, then with a last glance at Sofia, who was watching me and her brother, I went back to the lodge.

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EIGHT

I couldn’t sleep, tossing and turning all night long. I still cringed when I thought of how Danilo had reacted to me flashing my boobs at him. Why had I thought it would be a good idea? I’d tried to act like Anna, or how I thought Anna might act, but I obviously hadn’t pulled it off with the necessary confidence.

I was such an idiot, thinking Danilo would swoon because he saw me topless. He wasn’t a teenager. He was a grown man and had seen enough breasts in his life.

Sighing, I sat up, staring into the dark of the room. The nights out here in the woods were darker than in the city, and with it being a new moon hardly any light came through the windows, but the hints of gray lit up the sky. It wouldn’t be long until sunrise.

Eventually, I slipped out of my bed. There was no way I’d fall asleep again anyway. I opened my window wide, inhaling the crisp early morning air. Outside, the birds were waking up, their morning song soothing in its own way. I leaned against the window ledge and enjoyed the view over the tree-lined lake. From this vantage point, it looked like a huge mirror, still except for a few gentle ripples where fish burst

through the surface. The sun rose behind the tree line, turning the horizon gray rather than yellow and orange. Footsteps crunched outside. I peered out of the window, searching for the source of the sounds. Samuel wouldn't leave without saying goodbye, and I doubted Danilo would, either—at least not without saying goodbye to his sister.

Samuel and Danilo came into view, dressed in gym shorts and tight t-shirts. I hid behind the curtains so they wouldn't detect me, but I still got a good look at them. They talked for a couple of minutes before they started jogging and disappeared in the forest. I took a shower and dressed in another beautiful halter summer dress. When I emerged from the bathroom, Danilo and Samuel were back from their run and were working out on the lower deck by the lake.

For a few minutes, I watched them doing push-ups and crunches before I decided to stop the stalking and head downstairs. The house was quiet, except for the chirping of the birds that drifted through the open windows. I made myself a black tea, a Darjeeling, my favorite—with milk and sugar naturally. The terrace door was ajar, letting the morning air in. It was cool and crisp. I tiptoed closer to the terrace door, peering outside. I couldn't see much from my position, so I crept out onto the patio with my teacup. Danilo and Samuel were still busy with their workout. I curled up in the lounge shell, even though I couldn't see them.

I sipped at my tea and read the messages I'd gotten from friends at school as well as Mom. Soon, I heard them coming closer.

I was about to announce my presence but then Danilo said, "People are asking many questions. It was inevitable. I hope you have the right answers. I don't want Emma to find out about the deal. Most people don't dare spreading their rumors yet."

What kind of deal?

"Don't worry. I can handle it, or do you really think I want Sofia to find out you only agreed to marry her if I married

your sister? She'd be fucking heartbroken."

I stifled a gasp, my chest clenching with acute pain. Danilo had only agreed to marrying me in exchange for Samuel's engagement to Emma? But Emma and his bond had only been made this year . . . right?

Or had everyone just kept the truth from me and the public all this time? Mom, Dad, Samuel, Danilo. How many more had known?

"Marriage in our world is based on logic."

Danilo sounded so . . . emotionless. He hadn't been emotionless in the slightest when Serafina had been concerned.

I backed deeper into the lounge shell, scared they'd catch sight of me. The opening of the shell faced toward the other direction of the lake, not the path leading up from the lower deck. I didn't want to hear more, but I couldn't run off without them noticing. I closed my eyes briefly, trying to compose myself. I didn't want to lose it now.

"You know it. I know it," Samuel said, his voice briefly muffled as if he were towel-wiping his face. "But girls want romance and magic. They don't want cold logic. Especially Sofia."

"Emma's the same way," Danilo said regretfully. "It's our duty to make the bond work."

I was a chore.

His duty.

He was only marrying me so Samuel would marry Emma in turn. He'd never wanted me for myself.

He probably still wanted Serafina after all these years.

I blamed her and I hated myself for feeling that way. It wasn't her fault that my fiancé couldn't let go of her.

I blinked rapidly to stop myself from bawling. I didn't want to cry because of Danilo. He didn't deserve my tears.

I tucked my legs in, holding my breath when their steps came even closer, but then they went into the lodge. I waited a couple more heartbeats before I slid out of the

lounge shell and ran down the path, away from the lodge. I didn’t stop until I reached the lower deck, where I sank down and lowered my feet into the cold water.

I tried to let the lake calm me. I’d always known this marriage wasn’t based on emotions. It had been a deal from the very start—me as a substitute for Serafina. Still the knowledge about the additional deal tore at me. Emma didn’t know, either. For the briefest moment, I considered telling her, but then I decided against it. The truth would only cause her heartache. At least, she should enter her marriage thinking we weren’t exchanged like cattle.

I sat like that for a long time until my toes became numb from the cold water.

“Hey, what are you doing out here all alone?” Anna asked, startling me.

She sank down beside me, still in pajama shorts and a top. I felt like a broken record whining to her about Danilo, but I needed to get it off my chest. She listened quietly, a frown on her face. When I was done, I waited for her to start a rant, but she didn’t look that shocked.

“Did you know?” I asked, horrified.

She shook her head. Her eyes were still puffy with sleep and her hair all over the place. Her reactions were slower, too. “I didn’t know. It’s not like Dad shares these kinds of things with me. I mostly find out about them when I sneak around the house or force Leonas to do the spying for me.”

“But?” I asked because I could tell there was more.

“I had a strange feeling when they announced Samuel’s engagement to Emma. First, why had they stopped looking for a suitor for her years ago? Second, why would Samuel or your parents agree to the bond? No matter how horrible it sounds, you know in our world Emma is considered damaged goods.” Her lips curled, and she shook her head. “Samuel was a sought-after bachelor. He could have had the daughter of any Captain or even Underboss. That would have made more sense from a tactical standpoint as well

because then your family would have furthered their bonds with another city. With your marriage to Danilo, they are already linked to Indianapolis."

"I know," I whispered. "So, Danilo forced Samuel to marry Emma in turn for marrying me."

Anna touched my hand. "I don't think it says anything about you, Sofia. He used his chance to save his sister. It was probably his only chance. He would have married you either way, but he needed to secure a good match for Emma."

"Yeah," I said. "But it doesn't really make me feel any better."

She bumped her shoulder against mine. "And it doesn't really matter what happened years ago. What matters is that Danilo now keeps checking you out and acts very protective. That's a good sign."

I hadn't told Anna about my embarrassing boob flashing yet. Closing my eyes, I burst out with the story. For a second, silence followed, then Anna started laughing.

I gave her an incredulous look.

She covered her mouth with her hand. "Sorry. But that's hilarious. I can't imagine you being so forward."

My cheeks burned. "Yeah, well, I was, and it didn't go over well."

Anna lowered her hand, still fighting laughter. "He's trying to be a gentleman. That's kind of cute."

"Since when do you like gentlemen?"

She shrugged. "I don't, but you are all about the gentlemanly Disney princes."

"I'm not delusional. I know men aren't princes. Especially our men."

"Good," Anna said firmly. "That's going to spare you a lot of heartache in the future. It would have been stupid of him to do anything with Samuel close by. Your brother would have lost his shit. Danilo won't risk that much trouble for a boob squeeze."

I slapped her thigh. “You make it sound really stupid.”

“It was stupid, but also cool. I wish I could have seen his face when you showed him your boobs. I know they’re nice. Next time you want to flash your boobs, do it in front of Leonas and his friends. They’d holler like the horny idiots that they are.”

I shook my head but smiled. “How do you manage to make me feel stupid but at the same time make me feel better about myself?”

“Being stupid is the best thing about being young,” she said. “We’ll be tied down with responsibilities soon enough. Let’s make stupid decisions as long as we can.”

“Do I even want to know what kind of stupid decisions you have planned?”

Anna grinned. “No, but I’ll tell you anyway. But hey, who says I’ll be the only one being stupid. You seem to be catching up with me.”

Anna’s words proved to be correct. The boob flashing wasn’t the last stupid thing I did, nor was it the worst. Where Danilo was concerned, my brain just short-circuited.

It started one evening when Anna mentioned on the phone that Santino had met Danilo at a party and that he’d left with a blonde girl. I checked the news for Indianapolis afterward but didn’t find anything. Danilo had become more careful with his conquests, keeping them out of the public eye, but he still seemed to be sleeping with blonde girls. Anna kept me up to date after that because Santino reluctantly shared information with her. Apparently, Danilo was sleeping his way through the high society of Indianapolis—the blonde high-society, mind you.

Overcome with jealousy and anger, I decided to make him realize he had a desirable woman at his side, one who'd be his wife soon enough.

For once, I wanted to be the one he looked at with desire. The problem was that I wasn't sure what to do. Then a chance presented itself in mid-January of my wedding year.

Samuel mentioned that Danilo was throwing a huge birthday party at his lake house. Marco was organizing it, a last huge birthday bash before Danilo became a married man. When I found out it was a costume party, a crazy idea formed in my head.

I called Anna immediately.

When I told her about my plan, she fell silent. "You take my stupid-decisions theory a bit too seriously."

"I'm not joking. I want to confront him. I want to hold a mirror to his face."

"By wearing a blond wig and a slutty costume and trying to get him on the hook? What would that accomplish?"

"That he'll realize I'm sexy too, that he'll look at me and really see me."

"But he won't see you. He'll see a costumed blonde chick."

"Anna," I whined. "Least of all, we'll get the chance to attend a cool party. I deserve a bash before I become a married woman."

"I have a bad feeling about this. Not because of the party, but because I know you won't like how Danilo will react. He won't feel guilty when you reveal yourself after you kiss. He'll only get angry. That's how men in our world handle situations like that."

"Will you help me?"

She sighed. "Let me come up with a plan. We can hardly ask our parents to allow us to attend."

"That would defy our incognito mission."

Anna snorted. "You watch too many gangster movies."

"As if I have to," I muttered.

“How far from the Mancini lodge is your family’s lodge?”

“Fifty miles? Maybe a little less. Do you think we could stay there?”

“Let me see what I can do. We can pretend we need a girls’ weekend in your lodge, and then we sneak off to the party.”

“Carlo and Santino won’t let us leave their sights.”

“Don’t worry about Santino. I’ll handle him. I’ll give you a call once I’ve ironed out the details.”

In usual Anna fashion, she did indeed handle everything. Anna had a way of getting her will in a subtle way. I wasn’t sure how she’d convinced her parents that she needed a weekend in the woods with me, but they agreed and that meant mine did too, and so Anna and I met at our lake house on the weekend of Danilo’s birthday party. Samuel was staying in the Mancini lodge to party the weekend away. Of course, I wasn’t invited as Danilo’s fiancée. Heaven forbid girls had fun.

We arrived at the lodge on Friday afternoon, which gave us a day to prepare for the party on Saturday night.

I had Carlo and one of my parents’ bodyguards with me, while Anna came only with Santino. It was ridiculous that I had more protection than the Capo’s daughter, but since the thing with Serafina, my parents and Danilo were uber-protective.

Fresh snow covered the treetops and the roof of the lodge and crunched under my boots as I headed toward the front door. Santino’s car was already parked in the driveway.

Anna sat in one of the plush armchairs in front of the stone fireplace, her legs curled under her. She smiled when

she spotted me. “Santino made a fire for us to warm up.”

We hugged and I sank down on the armchair beside her while Carlo carried my bag upstairs. Santino stepped into the living room, his expression verging on murderous. He gave me a curt nod before he headed back out.

“What did you do?” I asked.

Anna waved me off. “He’ll calm down eventually. Don’t mind him. We need to focus on you and how to dress you up. You still sure about doing it?”

I nodded. “I’m going to confront him.”

“You can confront him without playing a blonde chick and kissing him first . . .”

I ignored the comment. I was determined to go through with it, even if Anna considered it a stupid plan.

The party was set to start at eight, but Anna assured me it was uncool to arrive among the first guests, so we headed out from the lodge at eight. Santino was driving us, and he hadn’t said a single word.

His anger worried me. What if he told anyone about our plan? My parents would be disappointed, and I’d be grounded until my wedding day. Though growing up in the mafia as a girl you were pretty much grounded for life anyway.

“Are you sure my bodyguards won’t notice I’m gone?”

“I told them I’d take the nightshift. They’re watching TV in the guard house. As long as you two stay out of trouble, we should be fine,” Santino snapped.

I gave Anna a look. She obviously hadn’t revealed the details of our plan to him. He thought we wanted to party.

I’d chosen a Catwoman costume. The leather cat mask covered the entire upper half of my face. Strands of the blonde wig trailed down my shoulders to entice Danilo. I hoped the mask would cover up enough to keep Danilo from recognizing me. I doubted he’d ever looked at my face for long enough to really notice the details, but it was still a risk. Maybe he wouldn’t even have recognized me without the mask. He’d never looked at me longer than a few seconds, if at all. I’d put on thick fake lashes and bright red lipstick, to entice and distract him since I’d never worn anything like it before.

He’d see the long blonde hair and be drawn to it. Then he’d smell Serafina’s favorite perfume. She’d left the bottle in her bathroom when she’d run away, and I’d taken it as a small reminder of her. Today was the first time I wore it myself and it felt strange. “How do I look?” I asked Anna.

She sighed. “Not like you.”

Not that Anna looked like herself. She’d dressed up as the wife of Chucky, the killer doll with a bright red wig and scary makeup. She was completely unrecognizable, which was necessary if we wanted to stay undetected long enough. If the Capo’s daughter showed up at the party, the news would spread like wildfire. Santino had refused to wear the matching Chucky costume. Instead, he was dressed all in black. At least he had a skull mask to cover his face, but that was the extent of his cooperation.

“That’s what I was aiming for.”

“I know,” Anna said. I could tell that she had more to say but was probably trying to word it in a way that wouldn’t hurt my feelings.

“Say it.”

“I just want to make sure you stay in control of the situation. You want to confront him, set rules, and make it clear that his behavior hurts you. Hold a mirror up to his face so he realizes how messed up his actions are,” she whispered so Santino couldn’t hear us.

It sounded easy when Anna laid our plan out. She was a planner and had no trouble getting her way most of the time. I hated conflict and wanted people to like me.

“Don’t worry. We went over our plan a million times. I’ll stick to it.”

“All right.” But I heard the doubt in her voice.

My worry that we wouldn’t be allowed to enter the party had been unfounded. Santino was well-known in our circles and got us in without a hitch even though the bouncers didn’t know who we were. They probably suspected we were society girls that Santino wanted to get lucky with. I’d never been at the Mancini lodge and it felt strange entering the place in disguise when it would be one of my homes in only five months. Our wedding was set for June, two months after my birthday, so I had time to finish school.

As suspected, the lights were dimmed, except for a few disco globes and spotlights that bathed the rooms in different colors. The party wasn’t just happening inside. A large number of guests had gathered outside to smoke, lounge in the hot tub or risk pneumonia in the freezing lake.

I leaned closer to Anna. “Do we have to congratulate Danilo? It’s his birthday party, after all.”

Anna shrugged. “I doubt anyone pays attention to etiquette here. Have you spotted him yet?”

“No.” I scanned the guests. Most of the men were sparsely costumed like Santino, but the women had gone all out. The back of one guy reminded me of Samuel and I quickly angled my body the other way. Samuel would kill me if he found out I was here.

Santino hovered close to us, arms crossed over his broad chest and his no-doubt pissed face covered by his skull mask.

The music was so loud that the floor seemed to vibrate under my heels. I had never been at a party before, and I doubted I’d ever be allowed to attend one officially. I gave Anna a wide-eyed look when a naked girl raced past us and

dashed down the path to the lake. She smirked, giving me an I-told-you-so look. Santino's expression on the other hand conveyed that he wanted to kill us.

I leaned over to Anna. "He looks pissed. Are you sure this is a good idea?"

She waved me off. "Don't worry. I can handle him."

I wondered what exactly Anna had used against him. Santino didn't strike me as a man who would let a teenage girl tell him what to do. But Anna refused to tell me. Technically, she wasn't breaking our pinky swear by keeping a secret because she wasn't lying outright. I wished I'd thought of that when we'd made that promise many years ago. Then I'd have stipulated different terms. My curiosity was killing me.

I looked around, not sure what to do. Anna linked our fingers and dragged me over to the bar on the patio. I shivered from the cold. Anna handed me a drink. I sipped at it and grimaced. It was beer with a strange lemony note.

Another glance around confirmed Danilo wasn't nearby. I touched my mask again. Still safely in place. Few people wore actual face masks. Even Danilo would recognize me without a mask though.

Anna nudged me, and I followed her gaze. My stomach sank. Danilo and his cousin Marco stood off to the side of the large wooden patio, talking to two girls. Naturally, Danilo was with a blonde—again. Always with blondes. Always with women who resembled Serafina but couldn't hold a candle to her beauty. They were less, a copy of the original.

Less.

So was I. *Not* what Danilo wanted.

I was the consolation prize, would always be.

Indignation rose in me. He'd never given me a chance to show him I was more than second best, more than a consolation prize.

I shoved down those thoughts and nodded to show Anna that I'd spotted him. He was only talking to the girl, but I doubted that was where it would end. I took another sip from my drink, considering what to do. Was I brave enough to approach him? To play this out to the end?

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NINE

Danilo was dressed in a SWAT uniform, no mask or makeup, which made him easy to spot. His cousin had opted for a Joker costume.

“This is your chance,” Anna shouted into my ear when the two girls headed back inside the house. “They’re probably taking a bathroom break, so you need to hurry.”

I nodded, suddenly overcome with nerves. I’d never flirted with anyone, unless my failed attempts to flirt with Danilo counted. “They could be returning soon, though, and what about Santino?”

He leaned against the bar next to us, glowering but keeping watch. He hadn’t touched any alcohol yet and probably wouldn’t.

Anna smiled coyly. “He can’t split himself in two, and I’m his priority. I’ll head to the restrooms. Maybe I can even chat up those girls and hold them up.”

“If people recognize you, you’re going to be in a whole world of trouble.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t get caught.”

Anna turned to Santino and nudged his arm. He leaned down so she could reach his ear. He glanced between me

and her, his eyes hardening, then he gave a sharp nod. Before they left, he walked up to me. “Don’t move a fucking inch. If I don’t find you right in this spot when I return, there’ll be hell to pay.”

I swallowed and nodded. God, he was scary as hell. I didn’t know how Anna could enjoy teasing him so much.

Anna winked at me, then she and Santino went in search of the restrooms. I righted the blonde wig, then paused. I gathered my courage by taking another sip of my drink before sauntering over to Danilo. His cousin nudged him, and then Danilo’s eyes locked on me. I tensed, worried he would recognize me. I didn’t even want to imagine the amount of trouble I’d be in. I had some difficulty walking elegantly with my high heels on the wooden boards of the patio and hoped I wouldn’t faceplant.

His posture changed, becoming alert and almost eager. Without my brown hair, my resemblance to Serafina was even stronger. I wasn’t quite as tall, and my facial features were a bit different. The copy. Not the original. Always the copy. But I knew I’d be close enough to her looks to attract Danilo. The use of Fina’s old perfume would only add to the illusion.

I swayed my hips as I moved through the crowd. I didn’t even feel the cold anymore. My blood was pumping through my veins, making me feel hot all over.

Danilo wasn’t the only man checking me out, and I couldn’t deny that it boosted my ego.

When I stopped in front of him, my heart was thundering. Danilo scanned my tight leather pants and corset that shoved my breasts up. Since he hadn’t really looked at them, he’d hardly recognize them now. I almost laughed at the thought. He definitely didn’t recognize me. He’d never undressed me with his eyes like that. Hell, he usually didn’t show a flicker of interest in my body.

He was interested now. His smile was dark and confident. And he had every reason to be confident. He looked utterly

sexy in his SWAT uniform.

“Hi,” I said, making my voice deeper and sultrier. The tone sounded strange to my ear, but it had the intended effect. Danilo shifted closer, that smile becoming even darker. It sent a shiver down my back. He looked like the big bad wolf about to devour Red Riding Hood. Something a little unhinged flickered in his eyes. This wasn’t the Danilo I got to see, not the sophisticated, cool gentleman. This Danilo was dangerous.

Danilo didn’t say anything, only smiled in a way that made me feel like his prey. Men in our world were careful when they interacted with me. I was the daughter of an Underboss and the future wife of one—I’d never been confronted with open hunger like Danilo’s before. Even though it scared me, I wished he’d look at me that way one day, and not a copy-cat version of Fina. “I’m—”

Danilo cut in before I could introduce myself with my fake name. “It doesn’t matter. Names are irrelevant. This is about tonight, not tomorrow.”

I nodded quickly, feeling my cheeks heat at his rebuff. At least, that meant he didn’t care about the women he met at clubs. He forgot them the moment he was done with them.

I wondered which Danilo was the real deal. Which was his true self? The restrained gentleman or the ruthless predator? I feared it was like Anna had told me. The gentleman was his public image, the one he needed to portray. But this version of him, right in front of me, the dangerous bad boy was his true self.

Danilo stepped closer and leaned down so I could hear him better over the music drifting from the speakers above the bar and our heads. “Was there a reason why you came over to me? You seemed to have a purpose in mind.”

I swallowed, overwhelmed by his presence. “I want to dance.” Good. That was part of the plan.

“Dance, hmm?” He pulled me toward a clearing off to the right of the patio where lights and heaters had been set up.

The bass droned even louder here, and a crowd of people was dancing wildly. I didn't recognize anyone. Danilo pulled me against him, molding our bodies together. We'd danced with each other before at social functions, and he'd always kept an appropriate distance between us, made sure his hand was high up on my back. He didn't now. His hand was on my lower back, and I could feel every inch of his strong, muscled body pressing against me. I felt like a marionette in his hold. His breath pressed into my ear. "It doesn't look as if you want to dance with me. Maybe you should return to the bar. The cat's only a kitty after all."

He'd noticed how stiff I was. Of course, he had. He was a Made Man. Panic rose in me. What should I do now? Anna would probably say this was the perfect moment to confront him, to reveal my true identity and give him a piece of my mind, but even as I went through the plan in my mind, I realized I wouldn't be able to pull it off. I didn't want to, not yet. In theory, the plan had seemed easy, but with Danilo so close, my brain couldn't function. I wanted to keep dancing with him, wanted his unwavering, dangerous attention. It was thrilling and terrifying at the same time.

Anna and Santino were still gone, which meant neither of them could interfere. I would handle this myself.

Even though this Danilo unsettled me, I was still drawn to him. I wanted to keep playing this game of seduction I'd never be allowed to entertain if I were me. I wanted—needed—to win him over as this wanton, sexy vamp version of me. He'd finally see me as more than the undesirable consolation prize. He'd see my worth, and maybe then I could stop feeling so insecure.

I shook my head and tightened my hold on his shoulders. "No. I love dancing with you. But it's too crowded for my taste. I prefer less people."

Danilo moved back slightly and smiled knowingly as if I'd told him a secret. I wasn't sure what kind of message he'd received, but it seemed to please him immensely.

Danilo gripped my hip as he leaned down to my ear, his breath hot against my skin. “Good thing that I know just the right place where we can be alone.”

“Alone?” I repeated dumbly.

Danilo chuckled into my ear. “I want to fuck.”

I was stunned by his demeanor, by the vibe of dominance and aggression he gave off, by his words. He’d always been a gentleman around me, always in control. He hadn’t even wavered a second when I’d flashed my boobs at him, but to this blonde girl he was completely different. His words shocked me to the very core.

Half dazed, I nodded.

“I need you to say it,” he murmured.

Say what? was my first thought. Then I understood. He needed me to express my consent verbally. My consent to fuck.

I couldn’t wrap my mind around it. Was this how it always went?

“Yes,” I got out, even though my brain was screaming *no* at me. The voice was Anna as usual. This wasn’t the plan. This was madness. But I could still confront him when we were alone. That was better anyway. This was between us and not for a crowd to witness.

After what felt like eternity, Danilo took my hand and pulled me along. I had trouble staying on my high heels, trouble setting one step after the other as my heart throbbed painfully. The stone pathway was uneven beneath my shoes as I stumbled after him, feeling less like the confident, sexy vamp with every passing second.

He dragged me around the corner of the house, down an even narrower path into the surrounding woods. The pathway was lit dimly by small lanterns dangling from wooden poles. I tightened my grip on him both to keep my balance and because I needed something to hold on to. He left the path and slowed to give me a chance to find my

footing on the rough forest floor. “Still yes?” he asked as he turned.

I nodded, looking around. We were in the middle of the woods. The lights from the lanterns was even dimmer here but it was enough for me to make out Danilo’s attractive face. Were we supposed to have sex here? Suddenly, he turned me around and pressed my back against a tree, grinding himself against me. My eyes flew open when I felt his erection digging into my belly. The most I’d ever done was dance with Danilo and hold his hand for a moment. I’d dreamed about more, had fantasized about his touch, but this was nothing like my fantasy.

His mouth returned to my ear. “I’m going to fuck you hard right against this tree. I’m not in the mood for fucking foreplay, so you better tell me now if your pussy is ready to take my cock,” he growled.

Fear swirled in my chest, stealing my breath, and with it any sane thought. This was what he did with all the blonde girls?

“Tell me,” he ordered.

This was my chance for the big reveal. Anna and I had gone over the moment often. How I’d remove my mask and my wig and whisper “I’m Sofia” in his ear. We’d imagined his shock, perhaps his guilt. Anna had told me I needed to lay down new ground rules.

But the words wouldn’t leave my mouth.

I gave a sharp nod, so confused and broken up and shaken.

“Say it.”

“Yes.” I didn’t even recognize my voice.

He turned me around, so I had to support myself against the tree. The bark of the fir was dry and rough against my palms as I braced myself against the tree trunk. I stared at it, breathing shakily, tears stinging my eyes. He pulled down the zipper at the back of my leather pants and shoved them down. My panties followed. The cold hit my skin and I

shivered. “I like your ass,” he rasped. He pushed my legs further apart with his foot and squeezed my ass cheek once.

I couldn’t connect these actions with the Danilo I desired and loved.

It would hurt. He’d tear me apart. I knew the stories of other girls, and they hadn’t been taken like this. I could stop this before real damage was done. I should have stopped it to save my honor. But I did not.

Maybe this was the true solution.

I waited silently, brokenly, hoping that this would finally set me free, free from crushing on a man who’d never wanted me. A man who spent every night chasing women who looked like my sister. A man who had never seen my worth.

I was crying, hot tears dripping from my eyes, scorching my cold cheeks under my mask, but I didn’t make a sound. I didn’t want him to stop. I needed him to continue and set me free. And then I felt him against me, his grip painful on my waist. I stared at the bark, listening to his harsh breathing. The cold seeped into my body, but I didn’t mind.

“I’m going to fuck you hard,” he growled.

No, he was going to kill me slowly, splinter me into millions of pieces of despair and hurt.

His grip tightened and he pushed forward, then jerked to a stop as my body refused to let him in. Stars blazed before my eyes as a sharp pain cut through me. I choked, bit down on the inside of my cheek. Hard, harder, tasting blood as it swirled on my tongue. I was cut in half with a sharp blade, torn apart by burning tongs. I was pain and humiliation and a crushed stupid heart.

“What the fuck?” Danilo snarled. I let out a small sob, then bit down hard on my lower lip to shut up. He tensed. My fingers shook against the rough tree trunk, its ridges scratching my palm, my eyes fixed on my engagement ring. I hadn’t taken it off. It mocked me with its shining beauty, with everything it should stand for and didn’t. A beautiful

sign of love and devotion. The diamond flickered in the lantern light. So very beautiful. So meaningless.

Danilo froze and let out a sharp breath. His fingers moved to mine, touching the ring. His ring. His touch was suddenly feather-soft, as if the anger had slid right out of him. He exhaled with a shudder. “Sofia?” he rasped, voice shaking.

Sofia. For a moment I wasn’t sure if I was still her—if I even still knew who she was.

I couldn’t say anything, couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, could hardly breathe. I’d stopped living, merely existed now. I was gone, gone, gone.

His palm stroked over my hip, so very gently, and he pulled out slowly. I whimpered, arched. The sound surprised me. I was numb. Numb and burning up with pain. Physically and deep in my chest.

Danilo tensed. “Oh God,” he breathed. Something trickled out of me.

He turned me around, lifted my mask, but his fingers hovered against my temples so softly. Tears blurred my vision as he appeared before me, tall and dark, his sharp features lacking the previous brutality, the aggression gone from his face.

“Sofia.” It was half plea, half groan. I didn’t understand. His thumbs smoothed away my tears, gliding so softly over my cheeks that I cried harder. I wanted to stop but couldn’t.

“I–I . . .” My words were like shrapnel in my throat. “I think I’m bleeding.”

“Fuck,” he breathed. Anguish. Was it his? Or mine?

Clothes rustled and a belt clinked. He bent and carefully pulled up my panties and pants, edging them over my hips. I didn’t move, only stared at him. He didn’t bother closing the zipper of my pants. I didn’t care.

He wrapped an arm around me and lifted me. His heartbeat raced against my temple as I leaned against his chest. He didn’t say anything as he carried me through the

woods. He stayed away from the lit pathways, choosing the dark. It felt good to be cloaked in nothingness.

Eventually, the lodge appeared like a beacon of light, and with it the sound of music, laughter, and conversation. “Bury your face against my chest in case we run across someone,” he said gently, and I did, breathing in his familiar perfume, something crisp and woodsy. He walked to the back entrance, and then we were heading upstairs. The music and the voices started to dim.

A door creaked, and I peered up when the lights came on. We were in a bedroom. Danilo lay me down on a soft mattress and hovered over me, his face close to mine. His eyes swirled with emotions, but his face was perfectly still, beautifully controlled. He removed my wig with careful fingers and put it down on the nightstand with my cat mask. He pulled back, and for a moment, he only looked at me. I’d never regarded his face as unabashedly as I did now. There was nothing in me to be embarrassed or shy, or anything. I was empty. *Nothing*.

His gaze moved lower to my legs. They were stiff. I ached too much to move them. I felt sticky between my thighs. “I’m ruining my pants,” I whispered. It was such a ridiculous thing to worry about, but I couldn’t help it. His expression was like a thunderstorm.

I tried to push down my pants, but the leather seemed glued to my sweaty skin. I wasn’t even sure why I was sweating when I was feeling so cold.

“Do you need help?” Danilo murmured.

I nodded and let my arms drop to my side. Danilo hooked his hands in my pants and dragged them down my legs, so much gentler than before. He fought to free my feet of the pant legs and finally dropped my pants on the floor, leaving me in my panties. They were mint-colored, one of my favorite colors, but I could tell they were ruined. I reached out, hands shaking, touched my inner thigh and lifted my

palm. My fingertips were coated in light pink. It wasn’t as much as I’d thought, and not pure red like I’d feared.

I shuddered out a breath.

Danilo closed his eyes, shoulders heaving, face contorting. Then he turned and moved into the adjoining bathroom. I heard water running, and when he returned, he had a washcloth. He sank down beside my hip, not meeting my eyes as he took the hand I was still staring at. He wiped it with the warm cloth, removing the blood from my fingertips.

“Do you want to clean yourself?” he asked, holding up the cloth. I stared at his face in silence. His brown eyes searched mine. “Sofia, say something, anything. Do you want me to call a doctor?”

“No,” I croaked. My family had suffered enough—they didn’t need this added to their pain.

His gaze darted to my panties then back up. “Emma’s got clothes in her room. Do you want me to get you fresh underwear?”

I nodded.

He stood and held out the wet washcloth, but I didn’t take it. He dropped it on the nightstand before he left the room. He returned quickly with a pair of black panties.

I hadn’t moved an inch.

He lowered himself on the bed and put the panties down beside me. Everything about this felt strange. Surreal.

His eyes came to rest on my still-sticky thighs. “You need to clean yourself and take a look to make sure I . . . that I didn’t seriously hurt you . . .” His deep voice trailed off before he looked into my eyes again.

I stared back at him, at the soft hazel-tone of his eyes, at the worry edged into every inch of his handsome face. I waited for the fuzzy feeling in my belly, but again I felt nothing.

“Sofia,” he rasped.

I reached for my panties, my fumbling fingers too shaky to shove them down.

He reached out, his hands stilling mine and touching my waistband. His eyes sought mine questioningly.

He waited.

For what?

My permission? He had been inside of me, what did it matter if he pulled down my panties again? He seemed to see the answer on my face, and finally slid my ruined panties down my legs, throwing them into a bin beside the bed. He grabbed the washcloth, held it out to me once more, but I refused to take it.

I was tired and drained. Broken. I didn't want to make this easy on him. I wanted him to suffer as much as I did.

He angled his upper body toward me, his warm hand touching my knee. He gently parted my legs just enough so he could reach between them. Deep down, I knew I should have felt shy and ashamed of being this vulnerable, but I didn't feel anything.

He ran the warm cloth over my inner thigh as if I were a butterfly wing, as if the barest touch could make me crumple. Where had the brutal dominance gone?

A muscle in his cheek twitched, but apart from that, his face was stone. He cleaned my other thigh before he pushed my legs a bit farther apart. A shiver raced down my body when he exposed me. I hadn't been waxed yet. I always trimmed myself, but I wasn't smooth as it was expected for a wedding night. "I'm sorry I'm not groomed yet," I said tonelessly. Why was I apologizing?

Danilo's eyes burned into mine. I didn't understand the look in them. The fiery smolder might have ignited the glimmer of childish hope in my chest if my heart hadn't been turned to eternal ice. "Sofia . . ." My name rang like a lament from his mouth, and then he fell silent again.

He turned his head, and I watched those sharp regal features I couldn't stop dreaming about. Maybe now I would.

His shoulders tightened as he touched my inner thigh, applying the lightest pressure until my legs opened further for him. He ghosted the cloth over my sore flesh, and I shrank away with a whimper. A shadow passed his face, a remnant of his previous fury, and a flicker of fear sparked in my ribcage.

I forced myself to still as he cleaned me with light brushes, then his fingers touched my thigh lightly and I became even stiller, my breath locking in my throat. Danilo pulled back and swallowed. “You should see a doctor.”

I shook my head.

“Sofia, I want to make sure you’ll be okay.”

I shook my head again. My body would heal, and the part of me that really needed mending couldn’t be healed by a doctor. I wasn’t sure if it could be healed at all. “I’m okay,” I pressed out.

His eyes were more expressive than they’d ever been when he’d looked at me. But the emotions I saw in them weren’t the ones I wanted. There was guilt, concern, and pity. I wanted more.

I looked away, my throat closing up again. I’d never felt more stupid in my life. But deep down, beneath the shame and hurt, a fiery ball of anger had started to glow.

He bent down and kissed my half-raised knee, looking like someone was twisting a knife in his chest. The touch of his lips, so gentle and careful, kindled a flame that I squashed at once. *No more.*

“My first kiss.”

Danilo’s eyes snapped up to me, brimming with a myriad of emotions. “What?” he murmured.

“That was my first kiss.” It was a stupid thing to say, a ridiculous, childish thing, but I didn’t blush, didn’t feel embarrassed. Emotions were a distant memory.

He swallowed, looked down to the bloody washcloth in his hand, then squeezed his eyes shut. He leaned his cheek

against my knee, his stubble scratchy against my skin. “I deserve to go to hell for this.”

I was mute. What could I possibly say? Danilo held out the panties and picked up the leather pants. “Can you get dressed?”

I reached out, and noticed a small cut in my palm, probably from holding onto the tree so hard. A trickle of blood followed the ridges in my skin. Danilo took the washcloth and cleaned the blood off my hand.

“It’s not deep,” he said.

Before he dropped my hand, he lifted it to his mouth and kissed my fingertips and my palm. He released me and I let my arm sink down to the bed. My skin still tingled from the affectionate gesture. I tried to make sense of the situation, of everything that had happened in these last few minutes and before, but my brain couldn’t process the enormity of it all.

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TEN

Danilo

Guilt was a feeling I was intimately familiar with, a constant presence shadowing my life ever since Emma’s accident that had been affirmed after Serafina’s kidnapping.

Yet, the strength of my guilt after what I’d just done hit me by surprise.

Occasionally, I’d felt a flicker of guilt toward Sofia, but now the flicker was a roaring flame burning my insides.

Sofia lay on the bed before me, her eyes distant. I didn’t even want to imagine what images were flitting through her mind.

How I’d talked to her like she was a whore?

How I’d pushed her against the tree and tried to shove myself into her?

What was she doing here? At my lodge? At a party she had absolutely no business being? And how had she gotten in? The need to interrogate her rose in me, and with it anger, but now wasn’t the time. She was still naked and most likely in shock. I needed to get her away from here before someone found out about this.

“Sofia, you need to get dressed,” I urged her again.

She grabbed the panties and inched them up her legs, her movements slow and distracted. She had trouble getting her tight leather pants in place, so I helped her. Sitting up, she closed the zipper over her butt before she leaned back against the headboard as if the movement had already drained her of all energy.

Laughter carried through the hallway. I'd made it clear that the upstairs rooms were off limits, but obviously a few drunkards had other things on their mind. Most of the rooms were locked, except the one we were in.

I shoved to my feet and stalked to the door, ripping it open. Scowling down the hallway, I discovered Samuel with an arm around a chick. Of course, he'd be the one ignoring my order. He was dressed as a goddamn cowboy and it fit his blond sunny boy look perfectly. The girls were going crazy about him. I was enraged over his obvious disrespect for my sister before the stark realization of what I had done set in. I wasn't any better. I was also fucking girls, and I hadn't even realized that my latest conquest was my fiancée. I was a fucking asshole.

Samuel looked my way, but his gaze was unfocused, and he was leaning heavily on the girl at his side. I doubted he'd be able to fuck her, much less remember a single thing of tonight in the morning. "Keys?" he slurred.

Gritting my teeth, I closed the door behind me and unlocked the door to the guest bedroom. Samuel gave me a drunken grin before he stumbled inside with the girl. He'd either be busy for a while or pass out.

I returned to my bedroom where Sofia was still exactly how I'd left her. I was really starting to worry about her, but calling a doctor, even if it was my most trusted man, didn't sit well with me—and it was against Sofia's explicit wish.

I had to find out what had happened. "Are you alone?" I asked in a low voice.

For a moment, she looked at me blankly.

“At the party,” I added. It was highly unlikely that she was alone. Carlo had mentioned that Sofia would be spending the weekend at the Mione lake lodge nearby, but I had been busy with work and party planning and hadn’t paid much attention.

She bit her lip, obviously weighing her words, her fingers fumbling with the covers.

Someone had gotten her here. She avoided my eyes. Sinking down beside her, I nudged her chin up but quickly pulled back when she tensed. Fuck. I was such a goddamn asshole.

“Where are your bodyguards? And how did you get here?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Then I’ll have to call your father.” It was the last thing I wanted to do, but honor dictated it. Sofia was his daughter and had run away from her bodyguards and found me at this party. I didn’t ask her why she’d sought me out, why she’d worn that blonde wig and used her sister’s perfume. I knew, and it made my guilt burn all the fiercer. Sofia wasn’t stupid. She wasn’t as naïve as I’d thought—had wished she was—but I’d have preferred it didn’t take this to make me realize it. My anger had overshadowed everything else, had made me act without considering what my actions might do to my young fiancée. I’d been lost in my need to get revenge, to fuck the anger out of my system.

Sofia’s head shot up, her eyes widening in shock. She pushed up, wincing, then clutched my arm. “Please don’t. They can’t find out.”

Her hand trembled. She was my responsibility. It was my duty to protect her, and I’d failed. How many more people would I fail? “Then tell me how you got here. Tell me who helped you.”

She swallowed. “You have to swear not to tell on them.”

I might just kill whoever was responsible. “You know that’s not something I can promise.”

I could see her walls coming up. She wanted to protect the person. So, it had to be someone who was close to her. Samuel was out of the question. He was extremely protective of her and would have never allowed her out of sight. No one else from her family, either. That left one of her friends. I stood and pulled out my phone, calling Carlo. He took the call after the second ring. “Who guarded Sofia today?”

“We did in the afternoon but in the evening, Santino took over.”

“Don’t leave Sofia out of your sight ever again, understood?”

“Yes, boss.” I ended the call and turned back to Sofia. She perched on the edge of the bed, one arm wrapped around her middle. She looked small and lost, and my guilt slashed me deeply over and over and over again.

Anna Cavallaro and her goddamn bodyguard. It made sense. Anna had always seemed like such a good girl, but it was all probably just for show. If she had her father’s cunning, tricking people into believing whatever she wanted wouldn’t be a problem.

Sofia wrung her hands, her eyes lowered to her lap. “I’m not taking the pill yet. I’ll start in a few days . . .” She shuddered violently.

I moved closer and sank down but made sure to keep my distance. “I didn’t come,” I said. Slash. Slash. That burning whip of guilt. I hadn’t even been halfway inside of her, but of course she didn’t know that. She’d been too tight, her body not ready for the assault. She was innocent, and I’d tried to fuck her against a tree like a cheap whore. “And I used a condom.” Because I thought she was a random girl out for a fuck, a meaningless fling to relieve my anger. Not my fiancée. Pietro and Samuel would gut me if they found out, as they should.

“Thank you,” she said automatically, then her brows drew together, as if she realized how little sense those

words made.

She was in shock, no doubt, and maybe in need of medical treatment, but I respected her wish. “Where are Santino and Anna now?”

Her shock came swiftly. “How . . .” She trailed off, grimacing. “Carlo.”

I nodded.

“Please don’t tell anyone. Santino would get in trouble, and Anna, too.”

“Why did Santino agree to this?” Anna and Sofia must have talked him into it. A hint of anger toward Sofia flared but I quenched it. She’d only reacted to my thoughtless actions in a childish way, but she was young. I didn’t have that excuse anymore.

Sofia shrugged and shivered again. She needed to catch some sleep and hopefully get over her shock.

I glanced at my watch. It was past midnight. “I should take you home.”

Sofia shook her head. “You can’t.”

Maybe I should have told her parents. They might have demanded I marry her right away, which I would have done if it weren’t for the rumors an early wedding might cause. People would badmouth Sofia, speculate about a pregnancy or about her sleeping around. I wouldn’t allow those kinds of rumors to spread about her. She’d suffered enough.

“Please just take me back to the lodge. Anna and I are supposed to stay another night before going back home. My parents will get suspicious if I return early, especially if you take me home.”

“I’ll take you back to the lodge, but I’ll stay the night to make sure you’re safe.” Santino obviously had a strange understanding of protecting the girls, and Carlo was an idiot for trusting him with Sofia. “Tomorrow I’ll have a long talk with Santino and Anna.” Seeing her fear, I added, “I won’t tell on them, but only because I want to protect you, not them. For all I care, Dante can cut Santino’s balls off and

lock his daughter in a tower until she's married to that politician's kid."

She watched me in obvious surprise then quickly looked away again.

I straightened, then held out my hand. Sofia put her hand in mine and pushed to her feet. She swayed slightly. I wrapped an arm around her, then nudged her chin up. Her eyes were a bit unfocused and her breath smelled faintly of alcohol. "How much did you drink?"

"Only a bottle of beer."

"Not the punch?" Marco had mixed the punch himself and it mainly consisted of alcohol. Things would be even worse if Sofia was drunk.

"No, I didn't want to be drunk."

Relief didn't really set in.

"Let's get you out of here. Do you need me to carry you?"

She flushed and shook her head quickly. My arm wrapped tightly around her waist, I led her into the hallway. The sounds from the party—music and laughter—drifted up the stairs. When we passed the guest bedroom, Samuel's girl left the bedroom half-dressed.

Sofia cringed and I tightened my hold on her.

Santino came up the stairs, one of his hands under his leather jacket, ready to pull his gun. A skull mask was shoved back on his head.

I narrowed my eyes at him. If it wouldn't have made waves and brought attention to what had happened today—something I couldn't allow if I wanted to protect Sofia's honor—I would have put a bullet through his head. I'd never liked him much. He was a good fighter, cruel and ruthless, but he was also reckless and arrogant. He looked at Sofia and grimaced.

"Where's your ward? Did you allow her to roam the party without protection as well?" I growled, close to losing my patience. I'd always prided myself on my self-control, but in

recent years, I'd often reveled in losing control, had feasted on the rush of adrenaline and anger. One glance at Sofia's still terrified and lost expression made my protectiveness trump the need for an outlet.

Santino sneered. "Anna's perfectly safe. Don't worry. And she isn't your concern, Mancini."

I smiled, but it was as much a friendly gesture as a dog baring its teeth in a snarl. "But Sofia is my concern and you had obviously no problem taking her away from her bodyguards and leaving her on her own at a party with men of our nature."

Santino's lips tightened. "Her bodyguards should pay better attention, or I couldn't have gotten her out of the lodge. Sofia snuck away to get cozy with you when I was making sure Anna was safe in the restrooms."

"I don't care what you were doing. You shouldn't have brought Sofia and Anna to a party, which makes me wonder what forced you to take them here."

Sofia glanced nervously between us.

Something flickered in Santino's eyes. I chuckled, realizing my guess had been correct. "Does Dante's little angel hold something in her perfectly manicured hands against you?"

Santino got in my face, but I didn't back off. "Don't you worry about my secrets, then I won't worry about the secret you'd like to keep." He glanced between Sofia and me. Of course, he'd know something had happened between us. Dante wouldn't have picked him for his daughter if the man didn't pay attention.

"My secret won't mean my death, yours on the other hand . . ." I shrugged. I doubted Dante would give Santino another chance, not where his daughter was concerned. He'd make an example out of him—a very painful, public example.

"And yet you don't want it to get out, so we're on the same level."

Santino was taking a big risk by provoking me, but he had hit the nail on the head. Protecting Sofia made keeping this secret crucial. She was a good girl. Her reputation shouldn't suffer because despair had made her seek me out like this.

"I'm going to take her back to the lodge now," Santino said, reaching for her.

I got in his way, shoving his arm away. "You'll stay away from her. Do you really think I'll allow her to be alone with you ever again? I'll take her to the lodge myself and stay the night. Once Samuel is sober, I'll ask him to drive there and make sure his sister gets back to Minneapolis safely."

Sofia's eyes widened and she tensed.

"This might lead to questions."

"My men know when to keep their mouths shut, don't worry, and Samuel will think I'm only being protective as usual."

Santino glanced at Sofia again before he turned around and left.

"Anna will be worried sick about me," Sofia whispered.

"She should have thought of that before she brought you here."

"It's not her fault. She just wanted to help me."

I gritted my teeth. I didn't want to let my anger out on Sofia, even if she was at fault. She'd gone through enough, thanks to me.

"Come on, now. Let's get you into bed." She stiffened even more, and I cringed at my own choice of words, but continued as if I hadn't noticed her reaction. I handed her the cat mask. "Can you put this on? I don't want someone to recognize you downstairs."

She slipped the mask on, then peered up at me with her blue eyes.

I nodded, wondering how I could have been too blind to recognize those eyes. But I'd had a couple of drinks and had been starting to feel drunk when Catwoman approached

me. I hadn’t paid attention to more than her curves and her blonde hair.

I still couldn’t wrap my mind around the fact that Sofia had mesmerized me with her body like that.

I led her out of the back entrance and to my car parked down the driveway. I never parked close to the party. Drunk people had a penchant for pissing against your tires or scratching your car by accident.

I knew I shouldn’t be driving, even if the recent events and the ensuing adrenaline had sobered me up and I didn’t feel drunk anymore, but I’d read up enough on intoxication to know that my judgment was impaired. Yet, I couldn’t risk calling my men to pick me up. Calling a taxi, which meant a public appearance, was out of the question, too. Even with a mask, I didn’t want people to see me and Sofia together.

I helped her into the passenger seat of my Jaguar, then slipped behind the steering wheel. I had been to the Mione lodge once before, a long time ago, so I didn’t remember the way. After Carlo sent me directions, I set out while the party was still in full swing.

The drive took longer than usual because I didn’t drive as quickly as I normally would have. Sofia fell asleep with her forehead pressed up to the passenger window. The alcohol she’d consumed must have knocked her out, or maybe the shock of the night’s events had exhausted her.

Soon, I was driving up the narrow driveway and parking. The lights were on. Of course, Carlo would be waiting for me. I got out and took a deep breath to clear my head. A few times I’d thought I’d fall asleep during the drive, and I was glad I’d brought Sofia here safely.

I hovered in front of the passenger door. Sofia’s forehead was still pressed up against the glass, her face peaceful. I was glad she was asleep so I didn’t have to look into her sad, broken eyes, but carrying her seemed like a bad idea given what had happened. Shoving my qualms aside, I slowly opened the door. Sofia sagged forward but still didn’t

wake. I picked her up, glad when her soft breathing fanned over my throat, and pressed her against my chest. She didn't wake as I carried her into the house. Carlo awaited me in the foyer, his eyes going wide when he saw Sofia.

"Boss, I—"

"Shut the fuck up. We'll talk later," I growled.

I headed up the wooden staircase and carried Sofia into her bedroom, which Carlo had described to me. I lay her down on the bed. I didn't tuck her in, and only removed her shoes. It felt too personal to undress her, as if I were invading her space without permission, even if I'd already done worse before. I only lifted her mask so the elastic strap wouldn't cut into her skin. She'd kept it on during the drive. Sofia looked peaceful in sleep, not to mention absolutely stunning. I'd never taken the time to really look at her face. It had seemed inappropriate before our wedding, especially considering our age difference. I straightened and moved to the door.

With a last glance at her sleeping form, I extinguished the lights and closed the door. My phone vibrated in my pocket. Instantly, I wondered if someone had found out. I doubted Santino had let anything slip, but you never knew who might have noticed something at the party and immediately told Dante to better their position. I relaxed when Marco's name flashed across the screen.

I took the call.

"Where the fuck are you?"

"I had to leave."

"Leave? Why? What the hell, Danilo? I organized this fucking party for you so you could have one last hurrah before you're bound to one woman forever. Don't tell me you went off with that blonde chick. Since when do you let a pussy make you forget your best friend?"

"Careful," I growled, out of instinctual protectiveness. Of course, that raised Marco's alarm bells.

"What's going on?"

“I can’t explain now. I need sleep. We can meet tomorrow afternoon.”

“All right, but you better have a good explanation.”

“And you better stop grating on your boss’s nerves.” I ended the call without another word. I dragged myself downstairs, despite the bone-deep tiredness. Carlo was waiting for me in the living room in front of a roaring fire. “Had a cozy night while my fiancée could have been kidnapped, raped, killed?”

Carlo shook his head. “Santino is Dante’s man. I thought he was trustworthy.”

“He obviously isn’t. And neither is Domingo. I don’t care if Pietro thinks he’s good enough to protect Sofia. Until the wedding, you won’t leave her side. Understood? I don’t give a fuck what kind of drugs you have to take to stay awake, but you’ll watch her wherever she goes, or I’ll cut your fucking balls off.”

Carlo nodded. I would have given Domingo a piece of my mind as well if he weren’t Pietro’s man.

A car pulled up in the driveway. Carlo’s hand immediately went to his gun, but I knew who it was. Confirming my suspicions, Anna and Santino entered the house. Santino was holding Anna’s arm in a tight grip as if she were a toddler about to storm off. She looked like one in her strange doll outfit.

“Where is she?” Anna demanded. Did she think I would answer to an order from a spoiled girl?

I turned to Santino. “Make sure your ward doesn’t wake Sofia. She needs to rest. They can chitchat tomorrow.”

“What did you do to her?” Anna hissed, trying to free herself from Santino’s grip but he didn’t release her.

“Go to bed.”

“Tell me what happened, or I’ll tell my father—”

I narrowed my eyes. “What? That you tricked him into letting you attend a party? That’ll go over well.”

“That you dragged Sofia away and did God knows what with her. He’ll punish you. He won’t stay mad at me for long.”

I smiled. “She’ll be my wife soon. Nobody will punish me. And maybe you’re right and your daddy won’t be mad at you . . .” I looked at Santino. “But he’ll be fucking furious at your bodyguard. I can already imagine the public dismemberment. So, unless you want to be responsible for your bodyguard’s very painful death, you’ll go to bed like the good girl you always pretend to be.”

Anna peered up at Santino’s face. He was stone-faced, but his eyes were burning with fury. At me, definitely at her, and probably at Dante for making him a spoiled kid’s bodyguard when he’d loved being an Enforcer so much.

“Good night,” I snapped and headed upstairs toward a vacant bedroom, glad to get some rest. It had taken considerable effort not to lose it completely in front of Anna and Santino.

I undressed, clothes but before I stepped into the shower, I caught the hint of pink on my cock. I turned on the water and let it wash away the proof of my transgression. “Fuck.”

I’d never really considered Sofia in a sexual way, not even after she’d flashed her boobs at me. I hadn’t allowed myself to think of her sexually, but her body had called to me tonight. I’d wanted her. Deep down I still wanted her. This had been a too short taste of something I wasn’t allowed to have until our wedding. After tonight, I doubted Sofia would feel the same way. A horrible experience like that wouldn’t make her eager for sex.

I closed my eyes, shoving those thoughts aside.

I’d messed up often in the past, and now I needed to figure out a way to make it up to my fiancée. Problem was my pride. It had always been and would always be a problem.

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ELEVEN

I woke on top of the covers. At first, I wasn't sure where I was, then everything came crashing down. The party, my flirting with Danilo, the sex . . . almost sex? I wasn't even sure what to call it.

The slight soreness between my legs reminded me of whatever it had been, and with it came the humiliation, sadness, and again this small flame of anger that steadily grew in my chest. I pushed myself into a sitting position. I was in my bedroom in my family's lodge. Relief flooded me. Danilo hadn't taken me to Minneapolis. I wasn't worried about how I'd be punished; I was terrified about worrying my parents, about causing them distress when they had suffered enough already.

I slid to the edge of the bed. Someone had taken my shoes and mask off, but not my clothes. The leather pants hugged my body uncomfortably.

I got up, forcing down the rising emotions. Judging from the dimness outside, it was still early.

Danilo must have driven me to the lodge, carried me inside, and put me on the bed. A new wave of embarrassment washed over me.

What about Anna? Was she back as well? She must be so worried. I crept toward the door, wanting to go look for her, but then I remembered my costume.

I cringed as I looked down at myself and the outfit I'd chosen to gain Danilo's attention. I couldn't walk through the lodge with it. What if my bodyguards saw me?

What about Danilo? Was he still here? Or had he returned to the party? To the girls he'd been flirting with before I'd approached him. I shoved those thoughts aside and went straight ahead to the bathroom. When I spotted my reflection in the mirror, I froze, completely stunned by what I saw. My hair was matted from wearing a wig and my mascara was smeared under my eyes from crying, but that wasn't even the worst of it.

That was the look in my eyes. It was empty and dejected. I didn't recognize that hopeless shadow of a girl in front of me. I didn't *like* her. After a quick shower, I dressed in simple shorts and a top.

I just wanted to go back home and pretend this weekend never happened, but I wasn't sure if I could. In a few months, I had to marry Danilo. Right now, I couldn't even think about it. I never wanted to see him again.

I grabbed my party clothes from the floor, rolled them into a tight ball, and threw them into the trash. Then I grabbed my discarded heels and hid them in the farthest corner of my closet before I stepped into the hallway.

The house was quiet and peaceful. Maybe nobody was awake yet. I headed downstairs. I dreaded meeting my bodyguards, or worse Danilo or Santino. I wasn't sure if I could handle a confrontation now. I needed time to come to terms with the situation. But the house was silent, and I would have thought I was alone if not for the scent of coffee.

Before I could decide if I should head toward the kitchen, the door opened and Danilo appeared.

Our eyes met.

“Good morning.” He sounded calm and composed, but he didn’t look it. His clothes were wrinkled, and stubble covered his face.

I peered into his eyes, hoping to see what he felt. But his eyes were guarded. “Good morning. Thank you for bringing me here.” This forced politeness felt safe, almost as if last night had never happened.

Danilo nodded. “Do you want coffee?”

“Yeah.”

I followed him into the kitchen. He moved as if this was his place, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. It pissed me off.

I sank down on a stool at the wooden kitchen table as Danilo poured me coffee. I took a sip, clutching the cup as if it were my lifeline. For a moment, he looked at me in a way that could be taken as affectionate, but then he cleared his throat and that polite mask I despised returned.

“How do you feel?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. I didn’t want to consider my emotions or the tight feeling in my chest and the hollowness in my belly.

“Don’t you have to return to your lodge?” I asked.

“Sofia,” he said gently. “Answer my question.”

This man before me was not the same man I had encountered last night. Something flickered on his face, an emotion trying to break forth, but it didn’t.

He waited and waited. The silence threatened to suffocate me. He was back to looking poised and in control, none of the aggression he had given off last night. Nothing that indicated anything had ever happened between us. And what had really happened between him and me? He’d thought I was someone else and wished that someone else was Serafina.

“Sofia.” Impatience entered his tone, and I snapped. I couldn’t pretend nothing had happened. Couldn’t, wouldn’t give him the absolution he probably wanted.

“It hurts,” I whispered harshly. “Between my legs, in my chest, everywhere. I should hate you.”

Danilo gave a curt nod, then finally his eyes cut to me. I wished I knew what he was thinking, but maybe it was for the best that I didn’t. “I didn’t know it was you.”

Didn’t he get it?

I pressed my lips together. “Trust me, I know.”

He nodded again as if he understood, but I doubted that he did. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Listen, I sent Samuel a message, telling him I caught you and Anna at the party and drove you here.”

I froze. “What?”

His eyes became imploring. “I want to make sure your brother keeps a closer eye on you until our wedding, until I can protect you.”

Mortification washed over me. “How much—” My voice cracked.

“I didn’t tell him everything. I said I recognized you the moment you arrived at the party and drove you back immediately. I asked him not to tell anyone.”

I swallowed. Samuel could keep a secret, no doubt, but would he?

“He’s probably still passed out, so I don’t expect him to arrive until noon.”

I barely heard him. I just wanted to curl up and cry.

Danilo leaned closer to me, his voice soothingly gentle. “Sofia—”

The door flew open and Anna stepped in. Her eyes zoomed in on me. She rushed over to me and hugged me tightly. When she pulled back, she scanned my face. “Sofia, what happened?”

I swallowed. Santino entered the kitchen dressed in shorts and nothing else. He glared at Danilo, who returned the look with the same fervor. Tears began to rise into my eyes. Anna noticed, of course, and sank down in the chair

beside mine. She narrowed her eyes at Danilo. “What did you do?”

I grabbed her hand, squeezing hard to stop her. She snapped her lips shut, but I could tell that it cost her.

“I need fresh clothes from you,” Danilo said to Santino. “We’re

roughly the same size.”

“Come,” Santino muttered.

Danilo followed him, but before he left the kitchen, he turned and said, “I’ll say goodbye before I leave. Stay out of trouble.”

I said nothing. I wanted to hit him, wanted to rage and scream, but I wasn’t that kind of person. Then he and Santino finally disappeared.

Anna shook me. “Sofia, talk to me!”

“Can we take a walk?” I asked, pushing to my feet.

After grabbing our coats, Anna followed me down to the lake. Neither of us spoke for several minutes as we walked close to the shore. Our breath fogged in the cold morning air. Eventually, I stopped and stared out over the lake.

Anna’s face twisted with worry. “What happened? Did Danilo hurt you?”

How was I supposed to answer that question? Hurt didn’t begin to cover the anguish I felt.

“Sofia, tell me what happened right now, or I’m going to send Santino after Danilo.”

I doubted Santino would do anything, no matter what Anna said. We were all bound by this shared secret now.

So, I told Anna everything, even as my cheeks flamed with shame. I needed to get this off my chest, and there was no one else I could talk to about this.

Anna let me vent, and afterward she wrapped her arms around me. I felt marginally better after getting everything off my chest but still not like myself. But when was the last time I had really been myself? Now wasn’t the time to find my way back to her. I needed to fix myself first, and I *would*.

I was still sore, and my chest ached in a way I'd only ever felt after Fina had been kidnapped, like my heart had literally been ripped into shreds.

Anna looked like she wanted nothing more than to hunt Danilo down, but she just held me tight, her eyes glassy. "You need to stop, Sofia. You—"

"I know," I said. Her eyes widened in surprise. Anna had been telling me for years that I needed to stop trying to win over Danilo, to convince him of my worth. But I'd been so eager for his approval, his attention, his validation. I wanted him to see that I was more than a consolation prize, that I was as worthy as Fina had been. I'd changed whenever he'd been around, trying to adapt to his behavior, trying to anticipate his wishes. Trying to be whoever he wanted me to be.

To become who I thought he wanted me to be, I'd lost myself. I'd sold myself short, given up my pride. Thinking of how proud Mom was, I felt ashamed of my actions.

It would stop now. I was a prideful Mione woman, and it was time to act like one. Danilo be damned.

"I think I lost myself."

"She's still in there. You just lock her in way too often. Let her out. Before the thing with your sister, people liked you for who you were. Why shouldn't they do the same now?"

Tears burned in my eyes. "I'm not sure I know who I am anymore. Everything I've done these last few years has been to please others. I faded into the background to give Mom and Dad room for their sadness. I never asked Samuel for anything because I didn't want him to think I was taking Fina's place. I always adapted to everything around me. I was so stupid."

"Then stop. It's been years since Fina left. Everyone's had enough time to mourn her, to miss her. It's time to move on, to live in the present. What's the use in dwelling in the past? You can't change it."

I nodded. Even if I was ashamed to admit it, I barely missed Fina anymore and often even forgot all about her—until someone reminded me. Usually Samuel, Danilo, or my parents.

I wanted to move on without the baggage of my sister's memory, but I'd always felt terrible when I'd tried because my family obviously didn't want the same.

"Be selfish for once, Sofia. In this world, we women get so few choices, so little freedom. We have to grasp happiness by the collar and drag it with us. We can't hope for happiness to jump into our lap. Be selfish. You deserve it."

I linked our hands. I wanted to be happy. "Let's keep walking."

"Are you sure you don't need to see a doctor?" Anna asked when I winced.

"I'm sure," I said firmly.

"Santino could take us to a doctor who wouldn't have to tell my dad or your dad anything. He knows enough people."

"I don't need a doctor," I repeated. Santino had looked ready to kill someone earlier. I doubted Anna would be able to blackmail him into doing much more, no matter what she had against him. "What I really need is hot chocolate."

Anna gave me a look. "You want me to get hot chocolate?"

"Yes," I said with a small smile. "I'm practicing being selfish."

Anna rolled her eyes but smiled. "Asking me to get hot chocolate after all you went through can't really be classified as selfish. I think we need to practice more."

We made our way back to the lodge, and I settled in front of the fireplace, my legs curled up under my body and a fluffy blanket wrapped around me.

"With mini marshmallows," I called.

Slowly, my smile died. Touching my belly, I thought of everything that had happened yesterday. How I'd expected the day to go when I'd gone over our plan with Anna in the morning and how far it had gone off course. I'd thought last night would end with a big revelation: Danilo realizing I was desirable and that he'd stop looking for a copy of Fina. Instead, it had ended with the realization that I'd given up myself to please someone else, and that whatever person you portrayed it would always be less than what your real self could be.

I'd always considered myself a loyal person, but at the first chance, I'd stabbed myself in the back, ditched my true self for an image I thought I needed to be, and where had it gotten me?

Danilo definitely hadn't looked as if he suddenly saw my worth. He'd looked guilty, and worse, he pitied me. Of all the things I'd wanted from him, pity wasn't one of them. But I supposed that's what I deserved for being such an idiot.

Even if last night had crushed my pride under its cruel boot, even if my actions could ruin me in our society's eyes, I'd learned a valuable lesson. Danilo wasn't the knight-in-shining armor I'd thought him to be. He wasn't the broken-hearted gentleman who sought those blondes to find consolation. Last night, he'd been like a hunter who sought to satisfy his own base needs. Lust, revenge, and whatever else haunted him.

But I was done finding excuses for his actions, done trying to be what he wanted, what he needed, because so far, he'd done nothing to deserve my kindness or affection.

Anna was right. I needed to stand up for myself for the first time in years, not just against Danilo, but also against my family. I needed to make them see that while they'd lost Fina without a choice, they'd willingly given me up.

I changed into Santino’s clothes and shaved, then I went in search of Sofia to say goodbye. I needed to return to my lodge before Marco trashed it out of anger.

Of course, that wasn’t the only reason why I was keen to leave the Mione lodge. I needed to get away from Sofia. My mind was a mess, and I needed to figure out what I felt before I saw her again. It had been a while since I’d messed up like this. Hopefully, it would be the last time.

I found Anna and Sofia in the vast living area, drinking hot chocolate in front of the fireplace. I cleared my throat and their heads shot up. Sofia avoided my eyes, but Anna had no problem glaring daggers at me.

“I need to leave. Samuel just texted me to let me know he’s on his way.”

“Okay,” Sofia said.

Anna obviously didn’t intend to give us privacy.

“I’ll come to your birthday party, that way we can discuss any last-minute wedding issues should they arise.”

Sofia nodded. When it became apparent that she wasn’t going to say more, I took my leave. Carlo assured me again that he wouldn’t leave Sofia’s side.

I was about to get into my car when Samuel’s Porsche pulled up. He practically jumped out of the car, no longer in his cowboy costume. He staggered toward me as if he had every intention of killing me.

“Where is she?”

“Inside, by the fireplace. She’s fine. I got her back safely and she didn’t get the chance to get in trouble.”

“Fuck it!” Samuel snarled. “Sofia isn’t the type to sneak off to a party.”

I smiled bitterly. “Anna seems to be, and Santino isn’t really helping matters.”

“Fuck. I should tell Dante.”

“You should keep your mouth shut or it’ll reflect badly on Sofia. You know how it is. Anna and the Cavallaros will get out of the situation unscathed, and our families will be left to suffer. Nothing happened, so don’t make a big deal.”

Samuel gritted his teeth. “I don’t like it. I want Santino to be punished.”

“From what I can tell, he’s punished with the task of guarding Dante’s offspring. Let’s keep it at that.”

I got into my car and Samuel stepped back. “Maybe you should try not to get shitfaced so often. I hope you didn’t throw up in my lodge.”

“How about you stop fucking blonde chicks?”

I swallowed my anger. He had a point. And after last night, my futile quest for revenge was over. “I’m done fucking around, don’t worry. I’ll focus on work until my wedding to Sofia.”

Samuel’s brow furrowed in doubt, but I didn’t give a fuck. I threw the door shut and drove off.

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TWELVE

“Sofia, Anna we’ll be late!” Mom called.

I fixed a wayward strand hanging out of my ponytail and studied my reflection. Anna entered the bathroom and hugged me from behind, resting her chin on my shoulder. “You okay?”

I smiled. “Yeah. I am, really.” She’d been asking me the same question on the phone every day for the past two weeks.

I was okay, physically. My soreness had disappeared after a couple of days. My emotions were still all over the place, though. Each time Danilo had sent me a message inquiring about my well-being, which had happened four times in the last two weeks, I had been overwhelmed by mixed emotions. Finally, anger had won out and I’d made it clear I didn’t want him to keep bugging me.

“Try to enjoy the day. You’ve been looking forward to dress shopping for years.”

I put my hand over Anna’s. “I will, don’t worry. This dress is about me, not Danilo. I won’t waste any thoughts on him.”

But I still wished Mom had made an appointment for wedding-dress shopping sooner—before the party; before I

realized my fiancé wasn’t what my silly hopes had made him out to be.

We were already late by wedding-planner standards. Six months before the wedding was the magical date to order a dress, but Mom had insisted we wait a bit longer. I had a feeling she was being superstitious, as if we’d be tempting fate if we bought the dress too soon, as if history might repeat itself. Emma had already bought her dress a few weeks before Christmas.

Anna had arrived the night before, and we’d watched movies and talked until way past midnight, so we both had trouble getting up early for the appointment.

“Sofia! Anna!”

Anna and I grabbed our purses and headed downstairs. Mom was already waiting, dressed in a thick winter coat and looking impatient.

We put our own coats on before we headed toward the car in the driveway. Samuel was at the steering wheel. Carlo and two other bodyguards would follow us in a separate car.

Samuel gave me a tight smile before we headed out. I’d been present when Emma had chosen her dress, and I hoped my brother would love it as much as I did. I was sad that Emma couldn’t make it today, but what saddened me even more was that Fina wasn’t with me. Whenever I’d imagined this day as a young girl, both Mom and Fina had been present. Now, my sister was thousands of miles away from me. I hadn’t seen or heard from her in more than five years, and now that my wedding day was nearing, I was desperate to talk to her.

We pulled up in front of the best bridal store in Minneapolis.

When we stepped into the bright store, giddiness replaced my sadness. Hundreds of dresses lined the walls on two levels, an endless array of different shades of white. In the past, I’d always seen myself in a princess gown with lace, rhinestones, and a full skirt. Just like a Disney princess,

as Anna always put it, but I wasn't that same naïve girl anymore. I knew Prince Charming didn't exist in real life.

The saleswoman, a voluptuous woman in her late fifties with bright red lipstick and long nails the same color, greeted us with a tray of champagne. Mom pursed her lips when Anna and I reached for the elegant flutes but didn't comment. The saleswoman led us into a separate fitting room that held only the most exclusive pieces how she assured us.

"Why don't you browse the dresses and pick five or six of your favorites to try on? I recommend against choosing more than that, because eventually they'll just start to blend into each other, and you'll be overwhelmed." With a bright smile, she left to give us privacy.

Mom and Anna turned to me.

"Do you have a vision of how you'd like to look?" Mom asked.

"Elegant. I'd like a veil, but nothing too flashy or puffy."

My mother exchanged a look of surprise with Anna.

"Why don't you show us an example, so we'll know what to look for?" Mom said.

I approached the dresses to my right and pulled out an ivory-white off-shoulder dress with long sleeves. I stared at the dress, felt the silk-like material, and knew I needed to try it on immediately. "Like this," I whispered.

"Try it on," Anna urged, practically shoving me toward the changing room, as if she could sense it might be *the* dress.

I didn't dare think I could have found my dress on the first try. That seemed like fate, and so far, fate hadn't really been kind to me or my family.

The saleswoman joined me in the cabin to help me dress, then went to fetch a narrow underskirt to keep the fine, flowy skirt away from my legs so I wouldn't step on it. There wasn't a mirror in the changing room, and yet the dress felt perfect already, as if it had been made just for me.

The moment I stepped out from behind the curtain, Mom and Anna stopped what they were doing and watched me. My heart pounded wildly as I made my way toward a small pedestal and the surrounding mirrors.

When I saw myself, I had no doubt that I'd found my dress. The fabric was airy, a mesh of fine layers. The off-shoulder design was daring. Lace trimmed the bodice that wrapped around my body and dipped low to reveal my shoulders, collarbones, upper arms, and down to the swell of my breasts. The slight sweetheart neckline accentuated my chest. The sleeves ended in the middle of my forearms, and the full skirt flowed elegantly around my legs.

"Perfect," Mom gushed.

Anna nodded. It was probably the first time I'd ever seen her speechless.

The saleswoman appeared with a simple, elegant veil that she attached to my head with a jewel-studded hair piece.

Mom sucked in a deep breath when the veil fell down my face. If Fina had gotten the chance to walk down the aisle, she would have worn a veil similar to this in style as was tradition in our family.

"Danilo will be blown away," Mom whispered.

"I love it," I said simply.

Anna touched my bare shoulder. "Then you should get it. You're the bride, and all that matters is that you love it . . . and yourself." The last words were said very quietly.

I smiled. "This is my dress. I don't need to try on anything else. I love myself in it."

I hadn’t seen Danilo since that night, nor had I seen Anna since we’d gone shopping for my wedding dress. I spoke to Anna on the phone almost daily, but Danilo had stopped inquiring about my health after another clipped reply from me shortly after the dress shopping. I didn’t want his concern, because I wasn’t sure if it was honest or driven by guilt.

I needed time to come to terms with what had happened and find the necessary strength to harden myself against the feelings Danilo evoked in me. My crush on him hadn’t magically disappeared, but I’d promised myself that I wouldn’t give up myself for this infatuation anymore. With my parents, I’d witnessed what true love was, a constant give and take. So far, Danilo hadn’t given but I needed him to. I wouldn’t make another move. It was his turn.

I walked out of the bathroom and into the bedroom where Anna was putting makeup on at my vanity. She and her family had arrived in Minneapolis yesterday. It gave us the chance to get ready together for my eighteenth birthday party—one of the most important dates for a girl in our circles.

Anna turned to me when I entered, and her mouth fell open. “Wow! What the hell are you wearing?”

Anna only cursed around people she knew well and trusted, people who wouldn’t tell on her. I loved that she knew I was one of them.

I glanced down at myself. “A dress. At least, that’s what the saleslady said.” I grinned.

Anna got up, rolling her eyes. “That isn’t a dress. That’s a liability.”

“A liability?”

She walked around me, checking me out like I was a piece of meat. “You’re a risk to any man with a heart condition.”

I snorted. “Right.”

I was thrilled with Anna's reaction. When I'd first seen the dress in my favorite boutique, I'd thought it would look perfect on Anna or Fina, but then I'd gathered my courage and decided it would look good on me, too. And it did. I'd never worn anything as daring before. It was cut low in the back, dipping down to the dimples right over my ass. Beautiful, intricate Swarovski-crystal chains held the fabric together. It hugged my body like a second skin. The neckline was high, reaching my collarbones, which only added to the allure. The dress had a long slit on my left side, revealing more of my leg than I usually showed. When I'd first put it on, I hadn't been sure I could pull it off, but now I was glad that I'd bought it. I looked fabulous.

"Danilo will lose his mind when he sees you."

I smiled at her, but we both knew it was fake. I'd tried to avoid thinking about seeing Danilo. It would be awkward.

"Will you be okay?"

I gave a resolute nod. I'd promised myself I'd keep my composure around Danilo. I wouldn't embarrass myself again.

"Let me do your makeup. You should look spectacular."

I followed Anna to the vanity and allowed her to wield her magic. Once she was done, my hair fell down my shoulders in smooth ringlets and my eyes seemed bigger due to the fake lashes she'd glued to my lids. I'd never worn fake lashes to our social gatherings before, but I loved how they accentuated my eyes. They weren't too bushy or extravagant like the ones I'd put on for the Catwoman costume, but they added a nice touch.

I grinned. "It's perfect."

Anna looked gorgeous in a dark purple dress.

"Anna, the guests are about to arrive," Valentina called from downstairs.

"My presence is required to greet *your* guests," Anna said with a hint of annoyance. For as long as I could remember, Anna had to take over representative tasks. It

was just something that was expected from a Capo's daughter. "How come it's not even my birthday but I still feel like the hostess?" She grimaced. "You must hate being friends with me. I really don't mean to hog all the attention."

I grabbed her hand and squeezed. "Anna, you're the Capo's daughter. People will always look at you if you're at a party. I don't mind. I know you don't like it. It gives me time to compose myself before I head down for my big entrance." I winked at her.

"Anna!"

Anna rolled her eyes before she slipped out, leaving me alone in the room. I checked my reflection again. I liked what I saw. Over the years, open comparisons to Fina had become less frequent, but I knew some people still compared me to my sister. But today, maybe for the very first time, I felt confident enough that I didn't mind. I wasn't less than her, definitely not a consolation prize.

I snatched my favorite purse—a small clutch with a silver chain so I could throw it over my shoulder—and left my room to head downstairs as well. The door to my right flew open and Leonas stalked out, almost bumping into me.

"Careful," I warned.

"Whoa!"

I flushed. "Nice suit," I said to cover up my reaction.

Leonas smiled smugly.

"Leonas!" Valentina whisper-shouted, clearly at the edge of her patience.

"My presence is required," he said with the same annoyance Anna had displayed earlier. They always insisted they were complete opposites and fought like cat and dog on a daily basis, but they shared many character traits.

Leonas strolled toward the stairs, as if he had all the time in the world. Valentina's tone had suggested that wasn't the case. Shaking my head at him playing it cool, I took a step to move down the hallway when Samuel stepped out of his

room. Originally, the plan had been for him to move to Chicago after Fina's wedding and work under Dante for a few years before he returned to Minneapolis to assist Dad. But after the kidnapping, he and Dad had decided his presence was required here for our protection. While he already owned a mansion a few houses down from ours, he wouldn't move there until after he married Emma. He froze when he saw me. "Sofia," he said, almost as if he didn't recognize me.

"Yes?" I asked.

He walked over to me, studying me from head to toe. "When did you grow up so much?"

I couldn't help laughing. "It must have happened in the last three to five years I suppose." I barely stopped myself from saying 'while you were busy living in the past'. I didn't want any conflict today.

He chuckled but a hint of wariness remained in his gaze. "Part of me wished you'd stay the little kid I could call ladybug."

"You can still call me ladybug when no one else is around. And it's a good thing I grew up or my wedding to Danilo in two months would be a problem."

Samuel's eyes hardened and his lips thinned. "Two months," he repeated as if he'd forgotten how soon the wedding was. Occasionally, I caught myself shocked by the looming wedding day. I used to look forward to my wedding day, but now I leaned more heavily toward dread.

"Don't forget about your own wedding," I teased to lighten the mood. Samuel would marry Emma only two weeks after my wedding.

As usual, Samuel's face became guarded when I tried to talk to him about Emma. I didn't push him. Fina had once mentioned that he rarely talked to her about girls. He was just very private with these things.

I'd often caught myself thinking about Fina these last few months, almost as much as in the days after she'd run off

with Remo Falcone.

“Sam,” I began hesitantly.

Wariness entered his blue eyes.

“Do you still talk to Fina?”

His face closed off, but I grabbed his hand before he could walk away.

“Please, Sam. I need to talk to her before my wedding. I need closure before I can start this new phase in life.”

Samuel looked away from me. “You really think that’ll make things better? I found that it only complicates things.”

“So, you’re still in contact with her?” As far as I knew, he hadn’t seen her since he’d attended her wedding in Las Vegas five years ago.

“We should go downstairs. Mom and Dad are already waiting.”

My fingers tightened around his wrist. “Sam, please. As an early wedding present to me.”

Sam sighed. “I haven’t talked to her in months. And you know very well that whenever I did, Dante was aware of it. I won’t betray the Outfit for Serafina, not when she’s part of the Camorra now.”

“Maybe you can give her my cellphone number so she can call me if she wants? It’s not like I could tell her anything of importance. I don’t know anything about business.”

Samuel looked at me for a long time. “If someone finds out, it could cause a stir. Danilo will be majorly pissed. Not that our parents or Dante will be much happier.”

“They won’t find out.”

“I’ll give her your number. Now, we should really head down.”

I squeezed his hand. “Thank you.”

Samuel cupped my face and kissed the top of my head. He held out his arm and I set my hand on his skin, then let him lead me down the stairs. The soft buzz of conversation drifted up. The foyer was already filled with our family and

arriving guests. Anna and Leonas stood dutifully beside their parents to welcome the guests while Bea hovered a few steps behind them, looking bored out of her mind. Mom and Dad were at the forefront of the welcoming party with the Cavallaros right behind them. It was tradition for the Capo family to welcome the guests as well.

My eyes drifted to the back of the foyer where Danilo and Emma appeared, probably because they'd used the wheelchair-accessible back entrance.

Danilo didn't notice me at first. His attention was on my parents and Dante's family as he went to greet them. The smile Anna gave him bordered on impolite, then she sent me a warning look. Her worry was unfounded. Even if I'd failed at my self-set plans before, I wouldn't fall into the trap of my past behavior today.

Samuel touched my back lightly and I jumped. I'd forgotten about his presence. He quirked one eyebrow quizzically. I needed to get a grip. No one could find out what had happened. Samuel had already been out of his mind with worry and anger because he thought I'd tried to attend the party. If he knew what had really happened, he'd lose it—and most likely try to kill Danilo.

"Let's go."

I nodded. But then Emma noticed me and grinned. Of course, Danilo followed his sister's gaze. I braced myself for the inevitable. His eyes met mine and flared with emotion. Surprise? Shock? His gaze roamed my body as if it were a revelation before he schooled his expression back to its usual cool mask.

A flicker of triumph filled me. His shock was like a balm for my anxiety. Still, I felt a hint of wariness, and my palms became sweaty. Even now that he looked like the perfect gentleman again, I couldn't forget his demeanor from that night.

Anna was practically x-raying me with her eyes from across the foyer, and I found strength in her gaze. I'd

promised her I'd be strong, and more importantly, I'd promised it to myself. This time I wouldn't crack.

Over the years, there had been several long periods of time when I didn't see Sofia. I'd barely thought about her once we went our separate ways. This time, everything was different, though. Since I'd dropped off Sofia at their lodge after our encounter at the party, I couldn't stop thinking about her.

It was mostly worry for her wellbeing but not only that. For the first time, I saw her as more than a girl who took her sister's place. She was a young woman with curves that had attracted me. There was no denying it.

Guilt, again, had been a very prominent companion when I replayed what had happened. When I'd met Pietro and Samuel seven days after the party in Chicago for Leonas's initiation, I'd briefly considered telling them. Until the wedding, Sofia was theirs to protect. Even if I hadn't known it was her, I'd broken my vow, the codex upheld by generations. What I'd done was inexcusable.

As I saw Sofia come down the stairs, looking absolutely mind-blowing in a tight, yet elegant dress, I wished I could turn back time. I'd spent so much time regretting the past

and what was lost that I hadn’t focused on what fate had given me.

Sofia was gorgeous beyond measure.

“You still have another two months before you can look at my daughter like that,” Pietro warned, shaking my hand harder than necessary.

I clenched my jaw as I smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ll honor Sofia the way she deserves.” It was what I’d promised myself after the party. I couldn’t undo what had happened, but I’d try to do better, and I hoped Sofia would give me the chance. The way she avoided my eyes gave me little hope of that, though. The present I’d brought her dug into my upper thigh through my pocket.

When she and Samuel stopped in front of us, everyone’s attention shifted to us.

Sofia’s smile was bright, but her eyes didn’t reflect the same exuberance. They were cautious, no sign of the shy infatuation of the past. Samuel released her and gave me a sharp nod before he greeted a few of the Captains. I lightly touched Sofia’s hip and leaned in to kiss her cheek. “Happy birthday, Sofia.”

She tensed under my touch but didn’t move away.

“Thank you,” she said formally. I searched her eyes, but with dozens of bystanders it was difficult to create a private moment.

“Can I have a moment alone with you?” I asked quietly. Usually, I’d have to ask her father first but after his yes, Sofia would be obligated to give me the same answer. I wanted this to be up to her.

She ran a tongue over her lip nervously, drawing my attention to her mouth. I’d practically fucked her against a tree, but I hadn’t kissed her yet. I’d remedy that once we were married—if she let me.

“If my father agrees,” she said. I turned to Pietro, and he gave his consent. None of the guests would feel offended if I

whisked my fiancée away from them for a moment. She could accept their birthday wishes later.

Sofia led me toward her father's office. I opened the door for her and lightly touched her back to motion her in. The feel of her skin awakened a primal desire in me, but I shoved it down.

Sofia shied away from my touch. Her body brimmed with reluctance at being close to me now that we were alone. If not for the public setting, she would have probably taken flight. I closed the door, my chest tightening at the wariness in her beautiful eyes.

"I apologized, Sofia. I thought that had settled things."

She shook her head, pressing her lips together. Her lack of communication frustrated me. I wasn't used to getting the silent treatment, and I hated mind games. Then something occurred to me. Maybe she didn't remember my apology? I tried to remember the night. I wasn't good at apologies but even if I hadn't said the actual words, Sofia must have realized I'd expressed my sincere apologies in other ways.

"It's fine," she said quickly, but it obviously wasn't.

I stepped toward her and took her hands in mine. She didn't pull back but didn't relax, either. "I wouldn't have touched you if I'd known it was you." The actual words *I'm sorry* were too difficult for me to say. It was a bad habit I couldn't shake.

Sofia looked up at me with a tight smile. "I know."

I wasn't sure what to make of her reaction. Frustrated by my own inability to communicate properly with her, I took out the small box with her present, hoping to salvage the situation that way.

"This is for you," I said as I handed the small box to her.

She took it and opened it. I'd chosen an intricate golden necklace with a diamond-studded teardrop pendant. Ines had told me that Sofia had had her eye on this particular piece for a while. "It's gorgeous. How did you know?"

“Your mother told me.”

Sofia nodded.

I took out the necklace. “Should I help you put it on?”

She turned around and lifted her hair, holding her breath when my fingers brushed her skin as I fastened the necklace. She turned around. “And?”

“It looks perfect on you.”

Her eyes seemed to bore into mine, as if she was trying to see beyond the obvious. I wasn’t really sure what she was looking for. I could tell that the present didn’t quite have the effect I’d hoped for.

“Maybe we should return to the party?” she suggested, stepping back from me.

“Of course,” I said, following her back toward the living area. Sofia kept her distance from me throughout the evening, a polite distance I wasn’t used to from her. It was the kind of behavior I’d wished for when she was younger, but now that our wedding day was close, her new reluctance to closeness worried me.

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THIRTEEN

An unfamiliar number flashed across my cell phone screen. After my initial confusion, I became suspicious. What if this was Fina's number? Samuel had promised to give my number to her. That had been two days ago. Maybe she was already calling? I reached to take the call, my heart beating excitedly at getting the chance to talk to her. I wondered what it would be like to hear her voice after all this time. Over the years, my memories of her had become hazy. Would it be awkward between us?

I trembled when I held the phone in my hand, suddenly overcome with nerves. My finger paused over the screen, and instead of answering, I stared at the numbers. What if it wasn't a good idea to talk to her? With only two months to go until my wedding, what if talking to her only increased my nerves?

It wasn't her fault, but she'd become the Damocles sword over my head, the unattainable precedent, an unwilling and yet victorious rival for not only Danilo's but also my family's attention.

It's not her fault.

And yet somehow, I couldn’t stop feeling that it was. If she hadn’t run away with the enemy, our parents and Samuel wouldn’t be as heartbroken. But if she were still here, Danilo would have an even harder time getting over her. It was a paradox.

Not her fault.

The screen turned black, and I released a sigh, but then a wave of guilt washed over me. Still, I couldn’t bring myself to call her back. I’d asked Samuel to give her my number. I wanted the contact, so why couldn’t I go through with it? Had she ever asked for my number? Had she tried to reach out to me?

I stood and headed over to my vanity, where I sank down on the small pouf and stared at my reflection. Even if my hair wasn’t blonde anymore, my resemblance to Fina was unmistakable. Suddenly, I didn’t want this anymore. I wanted to be different. As long as I looked like Fina, but not quite, people would keep comparing us.

My phone rang again, and my stomach clenched with dread and guilt.

Shaking off my irrational feelings, I finally answered. “Hey,” I said, trying to sound casual, but my voice came out shaky and hoarse.

“Sofia,” Fina said, relieved. “I’m so happy to hear your voice. I was scared you changed your mind and didn’t want to talk to me.

A new wave of guilt raced through me. “I was in the shower,” I lied easily. “Of course, I want to talk to you. That’s why I asked Samuel to give you my number.”

“I couldn’t believe it when he told me. I haven’t heard from him in forever, and then he calls and even allows me to talk to you. I’m over the moon.”

She sounded so happy, and not at all like someone new, someone different because she was part of the Camorra. “Allowed? Didn’t Samuel allow you to contact me before?”

She sighed. “I’ve been asking him to let me talk to you so often over the years, but eventually I gave up. Maybe I shouldn’t have.”

“He can be stubborn.”

“Oh yes.”

We laughed, and for that instant, it felt like time and distance didn’t matter, as if we hadn’t been separated for years.

“How are you?” Fina asked, that motherly worried tone she’d developed since giving birth to the twins ringing in her voice.

That was such a loaded question. There was so much to say after all the years of separation, but so much of it was linked to bad memories or feelings, and I didn’t want those to taint our first call.

“I’m fine. Pretty busy with last-minute preparations.” I didn’t really want to talk about the wedding with Fina but not talking about it would suggest I was troubled and that would raise Fina’s suspicions. Did she even know about the wedding, though?

“You’re marrying Danilo this summer.”

“In June,” I said.

“I can’t believe you’re already of age and ready to be married.”

“I’m not a girl anymore.”

Fina was quiet for a moment. “I wish I could be there and see you in your wedding dress,” she said wistfully.

For years, that had been my biggest wish as well. Now I was glad she wouldn’t be present. All eyes would be only on her, even Danilo’s, and I just couldn’t bear that on my wedding day.

“I’ll send you photos once I get them.”

“Yes, please do. I bet you’re going to be an absolutely stunning bride.”

“I love my dress,” I said softly.

“I’m sure Danilo won’t be able to take his eyes off you.”

I considered talking about my troubles with Danilo with her, but then I couldn't bring myself to do it. After all, she was the root of the problem, even if she didn't mean to be. It hit too close to home. I wondered if she'd read a few of the articles detailing Danilo's nightlife activities over the years. Fina was clever. She must have realized this was all because of her, the never-ending number of blonde conquests.

"I hope so."

"Has something happened? Something with Danilo?" Serafina always had a way of knowing when something was bothering me or Samuel.

I bit my lip. On the one hand, I wanted to ask Fina for advice. Usually Anna was my go-to girl for advice, but in this case, she wasn't that helpful. "Nothing happened. I'm just a bit nervous."

"Danilo's a gentleman, so you have no reason to worry."

If only she knew his other side, the vengeful man who took strangers against trees. The man who terrified me, and yet I still wanted him.

"I know," I lied. "How are Greta and Nevio? Can you send me new photos of them? I haven't seen them in so long."

"Inseparable. Nevio and his cousins always keep an eye on Greta. She loves ballet so much, and she's so talented. Remo even built a ballet studio for her so she can practice at home."

Her voice overflowed with love for Greta and the man who'd stirred up the trouble in the Outfit . . . and made me Danilo's fiancée. I wasn't sure if it was blessing or curse. "And Nevio? How's the little daredevil?"

Fina laughed in exasperation. "Don't get me started. He tests my patience on a daily basis. He and his cousins stir up nothing but trouble. But I can't really stay mad at him for long because he's such a caring boy when it comes to Greta."

I grinned. Nevio had been trouble even as an infant. I could only imagine how he was now. Would I ever see them again?

“Is Greta still so shy?”

“Yes, she’s got trouble with people outside of family, especially with crowds.”

I realized Fina hadn’t said anything about photos yet. “Can you send me a photo of them?”

Fina was silent, then eventually she said apologetically, “I don’t think Remo would approve of that . . . we’re still at war.”

Remo. The bane of the Outfit. Samuel’s face always flashed with hatred when he spoke of him, and I’d noticed the same thing with Danilo. “I understand. Danilo would be furious if he found out I’m talking to you.” Bitterness and disappointment rang in my voice.

“I wish things were different.”

“But they won’t be.”

“No, they won’t,” she agreed softly. “You know what? I’ll send you a photo if you promise to send me some from your wedding.”

I smiled. “Done.”

“Sofia,” Mom called. “We have to leave soon!”

I glanced at the clock. My first fitting was in an hour. The seamstress had hurried to get my dress done before all the others.

“How’s Mom?” Fina asked. I didn’t miss the longing in her voice. We weren’t the only ones who had lost something when Fina left. She had lost her entire family. Even if she was the one who’d left, her worry for her children hadn’t really left her much of another choice.

“She’s in full wedding-planning mode with both my and Samuel’s weddings.”

Fina didn’t say anything, so I blabbered on. “She’s desperate to have grandkids. If it were up to her, Emma and I would get pregnant right away.”

“She’s got grandkids,” Fina whispered.

My skin heated. “That’s not what I meant. Just . . . just grandkids she can take care of.”

“I know. For a while I hoped there would be peace, but I’ve given up hope. I doubt Dante, Dad, or Danilo will ever agree to a truce.”

“But Remo and his brothers would?”

Fina hesitated. “Probably not.”

“Sofia,” Mom called again.

“I need to go.”

“I miss you, ladybug. Keep me updated and send me all the pics.”

“I miss you, too. And don’t forget to send me pics of Greta and Nevio.”

I ended the call. “I’m coming,” I shouted so Mom would hear me downstairs.

My phone beeped with incoming messages. I opened them, and almost did a doubletake when I looked at the first photo. It showed Fina with her twins. They had grown so much. Nevio was tall, already reaching Fina’s ribcage, but Greta was a couple of inches shorter and petite. The photo perfectly showed their attitude. Fina had her arms wrapped around both kids, but while it looked protective with Greta, the arm around Nevio’s shoulders seemed to stop him from running out of the picture. He looked sullen, but Greta smiled shyly into the camera.

“Sofia!”

I shoved the phone into my purse, slipped on my favorite sandals, and rushed downstairs. Mom looked flustered when I got down to the lobby. She’d been working 24/7 to make both weddings perfect. If she kept it up, she’d be burned out by the time the weddings rolled around. But it was clear that she needed something to keep herself busy.

“We’re going to be late,” she said, but a smile softened her stressed words.

For a second, I considered showing her the photo Fina had sent me, but then I decided against it, worried it would trigger more bad memories and emotions than good ones. Mom knew that Samuel was in contact with Fina, so she could have asked him for her number if she wanted to talk to her as well, but Mom just couldn’t bear it.

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FOURTEEN

My wedding day.

I’d waited more than six years for this moment to come but the expected joy didn’t fill me.

When I’d been a young girl, I’d often imagined my wedding day. I’d dreamed about choosing my dress surrounded by Serafina, Anna, and Mom, fantasized about the endless joy and admiration on my husband’s face when he first saw me.

Fina hadn’t been there to help me choose a dress. I hadn’t seen her in six years and only once talked to her on the phone. She wouldn’t be at my wedding.

Deep down, I was glad. If she were present, Danilo would have only eyes for her, and even without her there, I’d have to battle her memory. He’d be thinking about another Mione sister when I walked down the aisle toward him. I’d stopped hoping for admiration from him on my wedding day.

Anna nudged me, one brow rising. “Hey, what’s up?” She leaned closer so Mom wouldn’t hear her, but she was busy chatting with the stylist anyway. “Is it because of Danilo?”

Of course, it was. Most of my dark moods over the years had been because of him.

“You are so beautiful,” Anna whispered, her face lighting up. “Enjoy it. Trust me, everyone will be speechless.”

I soaked up her excitement and let it carry away my dread and worry.

I wanted to be excited about my wedding. It was a day I had been looking forward to for as long as I could remember. I wouldn’t let anything ruin this day for me. I smiled, really taking in my dress. I looked beautiful. The stylist had put up my hair in an elegant chignon with the hairpiece attached to my crown so we could fix the veil on it later. Mom came up behind me and touched my shoulders, peering at my face in the mirror with a wistful smile. She was a few inches taller than me, and her hair was blonde. Both features that Serafina had inherited but not I. “You’re such a beautiful bride, Sofia.”

I smiled. “Thank you, Mom.”

She walked around until she was right in front of me. “Is there anything you want to know before tonight?”

I flushed and quickly shook my head. Anna winked at me and sank down on the couch, stifling laughter. Mom and I had had *the talk* ages ago, and I didn’t want to repeat it. Anna and I had talked about everything I really wanted to know. Memories from that fateful night several months ago resurfaced, my desperate attempt to convince myself that Danilo wasn’t still obsessed with my sister, and the brutal realization that he was. That experience had been painful. I didn’t want to experience either again. Yet tonight, we were expected to consummate our marriage. Danilo certainly would want to do it, not because he desired me, but because he needed to lay claim to me before someone else could.

“Sofia?” Mom asked, touching my cheek lightly.

I blinked, bringing my focus back to the moment. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

A look of understanding passed her face. “You don’t have to be nervous. Danilo is a gentleman.”

I nodded. He wasn’t really. At least, he hadn’t been to that blonde girl. He’d been angry and rude. Nothing like I’d expected. “Don’t worry, Mom. I’m fine. It’s just a lot to take in today.”

“It is.”

There was a brief knock at the door before it opened. Dad stepped in, then took his time admiring me. He shook his head with a small smile. “You look absolutely radiant, ladybug.”

I gave him a grateful smile.

“The cars are ready to go. We should head out in ten minutes. Samuel is making sure everyone’s in place.”

Dad came over to me and kissed my forehead. “This will be a wonderful day. You are safe.”

“I know, Dad.” I wasn’t worried about my safety. The Camorra wouldn’t attack. They had no reason to, and even if the Bratva or one of our other enemies tried to attack, they’d fail. The bridal car was bulletproof and accompanied by four cars with bodyguards. This was a high-security wedding.

Dad smiled at Anna. “You make sure our bride isn’t too nervous.”

Mom nodded. “I’m taking my leave. Maybe the maid of honor and the bride want a bit of privacy. I’m sure you two want to have a chat before everything starts.”

“I’ll wait outside for you,” Dad said.

I nodded and my parents left the room. Anna stood, smoothing her dress, while Dad closed the door so we could have some privacy. Anna looked absolutely stunning in a blue dress that matched her eyes and mine.

Her smile dropped as soon as we were alone, and she hurried over to me with a frown. “Don’t let anything ruin this day for you. You’ve been looking forward to it for years. Enjoy it.” She hugged me. “I mean it. I’ll be so pissed if you don’t party like there’s no tomorrow.”

I huffed. “Kind of difficult to not let it ruin everything when your groom would rather marry someone else. That’s not really something I’ve been looking forward to. This wedding isn’t about me, and you know it. Everyone will be comparing it to Fina’s failed wedding and everyone will compare me to her.”

Anna shrugged. “So what? Let them. You don’t have to be afraid of that comparison, Sofia. You are fucking gorgeous. People are looking at you because of that fact and not because they’re comparing you to your sister. She’s been gone for so long. She ran off with the enemy. Nobody gives a fuck about her anymore.”

“Leonas’s influence on you is obvious,” I said with a laugh.

“He’d like to think it’s his doing that I’m using the F-word so often. But I’m just doing it to annoy Santino, and it’s kind of stuck.”

I rolled my eyes. “What’s been going on between the two of you?”

Anna made a dismissive gesture. “Let’s not get into that today. This is your day.”

I searched her eyes. She was keeping something from me. “How did you get rid of your crush on Santino? I wish it would work for me as well. I just don’t want to be in love with Danilo anymore.”

Anna tilted her head in consideration. “You got the disadvantage of having to marry him. That makes it kind of hard to forget about him.”

As if I didn’t know it.

“Are you even in love with Danilo, or are you in love with the image you had of him? Because I think he’s been an asshole, and that’s not someone you want to be in love with.”

I raised my eyebrows.

Anna laughed and rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. You should know better, though. You’re the reasonable type.”

“You’ve got almost everyone fooled into thinking you’re reasonable, too.”

She flashed me a grin. “I prefer to have people underestimate me.”

“They do.”

We smiled at each other. I sighed. “You always make me feel better.”

“You must enjoy today. Drink a few glasses of champagne, dance until your feet hurt. Don’t give a damn about Danilo, groom or not. If he can’t see how beautiful you are, it’s his loss. Don’t try to be someone else. You are awesome. He’ll realize it eventually, and if not, then find yourself a nice lover on the side.”

My eyes grew wide. “Danilo would rip him to shreds. He’s not a politician.”

Anna pursed her lips, a twinkle in her eyes. She always knew how to lighten the mood with her antics.

I cleared my throat. “Thank you for having my back. I don’t know what I would have done without you these last few months. You’re my best friend and I love you.”

Anna swallowed hard and looked up to the ceiling, blinking rapidly. “Don’t make me cry, Soph. I have a reputation to uphold. I’ve worked hard for the title of Ice Queen.”

I giggled. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone you’re sentimental.”

She took a deep breath then fixed me with a stern look. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “I am now.”

“What about tonight? Are you worried because of last time?”

“I’m trying not to think about it.”

“Don’t let him treat you like he did then.”

“He won’t,” I said. “I told you he was careful and gentle the moment he realized who I was. It was as if he suddenly

couldn’t bear touching me.” I tried my best, but I couldn’t keep the bitterness out of my voice.

“Trust me, he’ll want to touch you. Take control. Don’t just let it happen.”

“I won’t.”

Dad’s voice came from the other side of the door. “Two minutes.”

Anna looked me in the eye. “I should probably hurry to my family. Will you be okay?”

I took a deep breath, then plastered a firm smile on my face. “Go ahead. I’m fine.”

She pressed a quick kiss to my cheek then rushed out and closed the door behind her.

My fingers trembled as I smoothed down my wedding dress and lowered the veil over my face. This was my day and yet . . .

. . . it wasn’t my name they would whisper in the pews today.

Because I was the consolation prize.

The surrogate bride.

Worst of all, I was not my sister.

I peered at my reflection, my face hazy through the fine gossamer of the veil. Dressed like this, I almost looked like Serafina, minus the blonde hair. Still less. Always less. But maybe Danilo would see the similarities between my sister and me. Maybe, for a second, he would look at me with the same longing he used to direct at Serafina.

Before he realized I wasn’t her. Before that look of disappointment settled on his face again.

Less than he wanted.

Tearing the veil from my hair, I tossed it away. I was done trying to be someone else. Danilo would have to see me for who I was, and if that meant he’d never look at me twice, then so be it. I was enough.

I glanced at my cellphone. I’d turned it to silent, but Serafina’s number flashed on the screen. She’d tried to call

me yesterday as well, but I'd ignored her attempts to contact me. Guilt flickered within me. I loved my sister, had never stopped loving her even if my family pretended they had. For a long time, the thought of Serafina's absence at my wedding had made me terribly sad, until suddenly it hadn't. Until the idea of having her there had made me anxious. If Serafina were here, everyone would only talk about her, even if it was behind my back, and not just that, Danilo would be faced with what he'd lost. I didn't want his eyes on anyone else but me. There was nothing I could do about his thoughts, though.

Serafina's number finally disappeared from the screen, and I stifled a sigh of relief. I wanted this day to be about me. Talking to her now would only increase my feelings of inadequacy. Today, I'd be selfish.

Dad looked surprised when I stepped into the hallway without the veil, but he didn't comment. We linked arms and he led me downstairs to the driveway where the bridal car waited. Samuel stood beside it, his vigilant eyes scanning our surroundings. In one hand, he held my wedding bouquet—a gorgeous, sweeping arrangement of white flowers: roses, calla lilies, and smaller intricate blossoms. When his gaze settled on me, his face lit up, his smile easing some of my anxiety.

Dad led me toward him. "Isn't she gorgeous?"

Samuel pulled me against him and kissed my forehead. "I can't believe my little sister is getting married today."

"You're next," I teased as he handed me the flowers. He pulled away and nodded, the smile becoming tenser. Samuel hadn't chosen Emma because he wanted her. He'd been forced into the bond in exchange for Danilo marrying me. Sometimes I managed to forget that fact, but now it came back with a soul-sucking force.

Samuel opened the door for me, and Dad helped me get into the backseat with my long skirt. Samuel sat shotgun while Dad took the seat beside me. Then he gave the sign

to the bodyguards in the cars in front and behind us, and we set out for the church.

Nerves fluttered wildly in my stomach. I twisted my engagement ring around. It was beautiful and I still loved it. Sometimes, I wondered why Danilo had chosen a different design than the one for Serafina. I pushed thoughts of her out of my mind. She wouldn't be physically present today, and I couldn't allow her to take up room in my mind, even if it hurt me to ban her from the most important day of my life.

The drive to church was only five minutes. It had been chosen based on its closeness to our hotel and wedding location to avoid a long drive. The driver pulled the car up right in front of the entrance, where four bodyguards stood at attention.

Dad took my hand and kissed it. "Ready, ladybug?"

I nodded, even as my throat became tight. This was it. I'd marry Danilo today and move out of my home. What would my life be like now? I'd been raised in a warm and loving home. Danilo had been so cool and restrained, except for that one night, and the tenderness he'd shown me afterwards had been unexpected.

Dad opened the door and got out, and like Samuel, he scanned our surroundings first before he held out his hand for me. I doubted anyone would kidnap me. I had never feared that. The Camorra had no reason to do it. They had what they wanted, and I hoped Fina's influence on her husband would prevent anything from happening.

I put my trembling fingers into Dad's, and he squeezed gently, giving me one of his reassuring smiles.

With a smile of my own, I maneuvered myself out of the backseat. Samuel gave a quick nod before he slipped into the church to give the small orchestra a sign.

I took a deep breath and gave Dad a shaky nod.

The moment we entered the church, my skin flushed with heat and my pulse sped up. Everyone stood, their eyes

directed at me. Hundreds of guests, most of whom I hardly knew, some not even by name. Now I wished I'd kept the veil. It would have protected me from their scrutiny and hidden my own nerves from the audience.

Accompanied by violins and a piano, Dad and I slowly walked toward the front where Danilo was waiting. The pews were decorated mostly in white, but unlike my bouquet, the small floral arrangements had dusky pink roses added for a subdued color accent.

Danilo looked better than he had in any of my wedding fantasies. He was tall and fit, his dark suit accentuating his muscular build and conveying power and sophistication. He wore a silver tie, so fitting for his cool persona. His brown eyes never wavered from me, but his expression was impossible to read. I didn't detect a flicker of nerves or excitement. He was composed and controlled, as if this was duty and nothing to get his pulse racing. I wished I could be like him, but even now, I longed for a bond driven by love and affection, a bond that went deeper than political tactics.

When Sofia had taken her sister's stead more than six years ago, I'd considered her the consolation prize. She'd been a child. I hadn't been able to see her as anything but the cute kid who followed me like a lost puppy. She'd been an

afterthought. My thoughts had revolved around Serafina, around what had been taken from me, what I'd lost. I couldn't get past that hit to my pride, still battled almost uncontrollable rage when I thought about Remo Falcone, and ever since she ran off with him, Serafina as well.

I didn't want Serafina, not the woman she'd turned out to be—maybe the girl I'd desired and longed to possess had never existed in the first place. She was a figment of my fantasies, something I'd construed to make my possession of her an even bigger triumph. I'd been young. I'd enjoyed the envy of other men who wanted her for themselves. Their pity and schadenfreude following my humiliation by Remo's hand had only fueled my fury and hunger for revenge . . . and my insatiable need to prove myself.

Today, I considered myself a different person. I was still too prideful, still hungry for revenge, but it wasn't all-consuming. It had been a long struggle, one I was still fighting, but the party five months ago had only spurred me on.

In the beginning and over the years, I'd compared Sofia to her sister. Had looked for similarities, for hints that our bond was doomed as well. Marrying another Mione woman had seemed like tempting fate.

As I regarded my young wife striding toward me, I realized she had little of her sister, and I was relieved. Serafina and my obsession with her had almost brought me to my knees. Sofia wasn't her sister. She was less poised, less controlled, and wore her emotions on her sleeve. I'd considered those traits disadvantages, now I realized they weren't.

When Pietro finally handed Sofia over to me, her palm was cold and sweaty in mine. She briefly met my gaze then quickly looked away, her cheeks tinging red. The way her fingers didn't close around mine and the way she leaned away the slightest bit made it clear that she still hadn't overcome her aversion to my closeness.

Since our encounter at the party, Sofia had avoided me and whenever we'd met, she'd been nervous and aloof. She had no reason to be ashamed and she certainly didn't have to fear me. Her youth and inexperience excused her foolish behavior. I only had my wrath as explanation, and it wasn't a good one.

I allowed myself to take Sofia in, to see her for what she was: a gorgeous young woman. Not a consolation prize, not Serafina's sister.

And damn it, Sofia was stunning. I was glad she'd stopped dyeing her hair blonde. Her auburn hair contrasted beautifully with her fair skin and baby blue eyes.

She had a soft smattering of freckles that I'd never noticed before, probably because makeup had covered them up, which was a shame because they added to Sofia's charm. Her dress wasn't pompous like I'd thought. She'd opted for an elegant, flowy piece that accentuated her almost elfin figure. I had trouble taking my eyes off her when the priest began his speech. His words held little meaning to me, but with hundreds of eyes on me, I had to pretend.

Sniffling came from the pews. Perhaps Mom. Ines was usually more controlled, even if her immaculate mask had had a chink in it since Serafina's kidnapping. I shoved the thought aside. Today, the past would lay dormant.

After the priest pronounced us man and wife, Sofia stiffened. It was time for the kiss. Ever since that night, my dreams had been filled with Sofia. Kissing had been only a small part of my fantasies. Seeing Sofia's reaction to my closeness, I knew our sexual encounters would take a very different turn from my dreams—at least until I could show her how good I could make her feel. I hadn't been a selfish lover in the past, but my one-night stands with the blondes had hardly been about pleasure and more about venting my anger. Of course, Sofia didn't know that. I could only imagine how she imagined our sex life would be like. While I

loved to dominate and was a demanding lover, what Sofia had witnessed definitely wasn't what I had planned for her.

Turning fully to her, I took the lead and cupped her cheeks. She met my eyes, and I hoped she could see that from this day forward, I'd do my best to make her forget our painful encounter and all my other fuckups. She closed her eyes when I leaned down and pressed my lips against hers. This should have been our first intimate moment, Sofia's first experience. Maybe one day she'd only remember the good.

When I pulled back, her cheeks were red, but she was still tense. Her eyes fluttered open, beautiful blue and unguardedly hopeful. That was the look from the past . . . before I'd crushed her innocence into dust. As if on cue, her expression turned wary. She looked away and I released her face, taking her hand instead. Applause rose among our guests, and soon everyone was standing, waiting to see us out.

I took Sofia's hand into mine and led her down the aisle and out the church where staff with champagne and finger food were waiting for us.

"Are you okay?" I murmured before the first guests could swarm in on us.

Sofia accepted the glass of champagne I held out to her and took a sip. "Of course."

Dante, Valentina, and their children appeared before us, cutting our moment short. Close to an hour of congratulatory words followed before we could finally head to the hotel for the festivities.

We took a limousine, which gave us another moment of privacy before the party. The barrier between the driver and us was up, so he wouldn't be able to hear us.

"Do you like your wedding ring?" I asked, running my thumb over her finger. I had chosen rings that had an ombre-effect, changing gradually from white gold to rose gold. My ring was simple, the white gold more prominent,

but the rose gold dominated Sofia's ring. One side was lined with small diamonds. It was meant to symbolize our different personalities, mine cold and controlled, hers warm and hopeful, coming together with this marriage. I'd planned on telling her during the car ride, but now I couldn't bring myself to explain the emotional intention behind the rings.

"It's beautiful. I've never seen a color progression like that."

She fell silent and I was once more at a loss for what to say. In the past, Sofia had tried to engage me in chitchat, but her sudden silence hit me unprepared. I usually only talked business with people. Emma was the only one who engaged me in other topics, but then it was she who steered the conversation. It wasn't that I didn't have other interests, but I gave them little room beside work. And with Sofia, I didn't know enough to even pick a topic.

"Did you choose the flowers?" I asked eventually and could have shot myself. The only thing missing was a talk about the weather.

Sofia's brows puckered. "The color scheme, yes, but Anna and my mother handled the arrangements."

"You and Anna are still close."

Sofia gave me a hard look. "Why wouldn't we be?"

"She was the reason you were at the party."

Sofia let out a disbelieving laugh, jerking her hand away from mine. "I wanted to be at the party to see with my own eyes how you hunted blonde girls. If I'd ceased contact with anyone after that night, it would have been you." She snapped her lips shut.

"I suppose I deserve that," I murmured.

Sofia turned to the window.

If she knew why I'd chased those girls, maybe she wouldn't take it so personally, but I didn't feel comfortable sharing my greatest weakness with her.

It was time for our first dance. Sofia had played her part so far. Nobody would have guessed she wasn't the happy bride she portrayed so skillfully. I caught the occasional flicker of frustration in her eyes, though. Probably because they were directed at me. As usual, my pride stopped me from offering an apology. Instead, I pretended I didn't notice her sour mood.

Everyone rose around us, awaiting our dance. I stood and held out my hand for Sofia to take. With a graceful smile, she let me pull her to her feet and lead her to the dancefloor. Her fingers felt a little stiff in mine and the flickers of nerves showed on her face. I pulled Sofia into my arms, my palm on her lower back. She didn't relax in my hold, but she easily followed my lead. "Are you enjoying yourself at least a little?"

Sofia looked up in surprise, her steps faltering for a beat but then she moved along again. "Yes, I am," she said quickly. It was polite and detached. This wasn't the girl I remembered from previous encounters.

I gave a terse nod. "Are you angry?" I had trouble analyzing her mood. Anger was part of it, but there was more. She felt uncomfortable around me, and I'd only blamed it on her nerves due to our unfortunate party encounter but now I wasn't sure.

"Why would I be?" she asked, but her posture had become even tenser.

"Because of what happened at the party."

Her cheeks tinged red and she frowned at my chest before her face smoothed into her pleasant smile again. "You didn't know it was me."

Her tone and eyes betrayed her words to be false. If she wanted to fool me, she needed to practice harder. “That’s true, but that doesn’t mean you don’t blame me.”

A hint of frustration flashed across her face. “Should I blame you?” Her voice made it clear she meant it as a rhetorical question. I wasn’t used to justifying myself, so anger reared its ugly head.

“You weren’t supposed to be at a party, Sofia. We weren’t married yet, so I was still well within my rights to do as I please.” Our conversation was taking a wrong turn. I had felt guilty afterwards after all, but now confronted with it, I just couldn’t admit to my fault. So fucking prideful, I wanted to kick myself.

“Many men continue to do as they please. Men always do as they please, no matter the damage they do.”

It was the most challenging thing I’d ever heard from Sofia. I was glad to see she had some bite. I’d been worried that her youth would make her a fragile thing who would never stand up to me. If she showed some sass on our wedding day, that showed promise. “I most certainly won’t do as we please now that we’re married.” I almost added that I had stopped being with other women since the party, but my damn pride kept the words at bay. It felt like a weakness to admit it aloud.

“That’s good I suppose.”

I didn’t get the chance for a reply because our song ended, and it was my turn to dance with Ines. As usual, her appearance gave me a strange sense of premature déjà vu, as if she reflected the future that might have been. She was like the older version of Serafina. If things hadn’t taken the turn they had, that might have been my reality in twenty years. Unlike in previous years, I didn’t feel a pang at that thought. My eyes followed Sofia as she danced with Dante since she couldn’t dance with my father. I was glad to have Sofia at my side, even if I feared our first weeks would be challenging.

“You can’t take your eyes off her, can you?” Ines asked with a pleased smile as she followed my gaze toward her daughter.

She was right. I had trouble keeping my eyes off her. She was stunning, and now she was mine. What had been before was now irrelevant. I couldn’t deny that I desired her. It was as if a switch had been turned, especially now that I had every right to claim her. Given our last encounter, I assumed Sofia wasn’t as keen about sharing a bed with me tonight, but I’d take my time giving her pleasure to ease her worries.

My thoughts got derailed when my eyes passed Emma. She sat at our table, watching the dance floor. She’d put on her brave face, an expression I was too familiar with. Again, she sat at the sidelines of life, forced to see it pass her by. It pissed me off and made me feel guilty all over again. Samuel was dancing with Valentina, and Emma followed them with longing.

“Do you want to go to her?” Ines asked softly.

“When the song has ended.”

The moment the last chord played, I excused myself from the dancefloor. From the corner of my eye, I saw Samuel dancing with Anna. I felt the unreasonable urge to cross the dancefloor and punch his stupid face. It was his job to take care of my sister. She was his fiancée, for fuck’s sake, and in only two weeks she’d be his wife. Instead, he was enjoying himself while Emma suffered in silence behind her public mask. She was such a beautiful woman, but all anyone saw was the wheelchair. It made me unreasonably angry.

I stopped in front of Emma, trying to hide my anger from her. Usually it only embarrassed her.

“You and Sofia were such a stunning pair on the dancefloor,” she said.

“Why are you here all alone?” I said in a tone that barely cloaked my emotions. Mom was dancing with one of the Captains and seemed to be enjoying herself immensely. Not that I didn’t want her to be happy; she’d suffered enough

after Dad’s death, but she was supposed to keep an eye on Emma.

Emma frowned. “I like to watch, and I don’t want people to feel obligated to stay with me.”

I made a dismissive sound. Then I extended my hand. “Will you dance with me?”

Emma looked almost wounded when I asked. “Danilo—”

“You always loved to dance.”

“I did, when I had legs capable of dancing,” she hissed.

I bent and slid one arm under her legs while the other supported her back before I lifted her out of her wheelchair. Her eyes widened.

“What are you doing?” Her eyes scanning the crowd—everyone was watching. I didn’t care. If one of them said a single word, I’d make this a bloody wedding.

“It’s my wedding, and I want a dance with my sister,” I said firmly as I held her against my chest. Her arms finally came around my neck and she gave me a look that suggested I was delusional.

“You can’t carry me through a dance. I’m too heavy.”

I carried her toward the dancefloor and people made room for us since we required a bigger space to dance due to the way I was holding Emma. “Are you suggesting I’m not strong enough?”

Emma smiled gently. “You are the strongest man I know.”

I began to dance to the music with Emma in my arms, ignoring the curious looks, but scowling at those who dared to direct pity at my sister. She didn’t want their pity. Soon, Emma started laughing as we whirled around to the music. When the dance was over, and I carried her back to her wheelchair, she didn’t release me immediately but clung to my neck for a few seconds.

“Thank you so much. You’re the best brother I could ever wish for.”

I kissed her temple then straightened.

Sofia approached us. For the first time since the party, she looked at me like she'd looked at me in the past, as if I was a man beyond his sins. It hadn't been my intention, but seeing it gave me hope that Sofia would forget what had happened. Of course, it was hypocritical of me to expect her to lay the past to rest so quickly when I still clung to it. She lightly touched my shoulder, a silent praise. "Your dance was beautiful," she said to Emma's obvious embarrassment. Then she sank down beside Emma with an audible sigh and slipped off her high heels.

"You need to dance with Mom now," Emma reminded me. My life organizer. Mom was indeed heading my way, determined to follow etiquette. I, however, was reluctant to leave Emma.

"Is it okay if I sit beside you for a bit?" Sofia asked Emma, who bit her lip. "You should dance. You don't have to spend time with me. It's okay. I don't mind watching."

Sofia leaned closer to Emma and began massaging her feet. "To be honest, my feet need some rest. My high heels are killing me."

Emma's smile brightened.

I could have kissed Sofia. Her kindness was impressive and made my own selfish acts of the past all the more despicable.

After a few more dances, I managed to escape the dancefloor and went in search of Samuel. I found him in the courtyard of the hotel, typing on his phone. He tensed and looked up at my approach.

"We need to talk," I muttered, my voice clipped.

One of his eyebrows darted up in that annoying way he had. His cellphone flashed with a message. I didn't see the words but didn't miss the kiss emojis. I got right in his face. "I hope that isn't what I think it is."

He narrowed his eyes at me and slid his phone into his pocket. "How about you mind your own fucking business, Danilo?"

“You’re marrying my sister in two weeks. I won’t let you disrespect her by messing with other women, understood?”

He sneered. “I don’t give a fuck what you want. I’m not married to your sister yet, so what I do in the next two weeks is my fucking business. And if I remember correctly, you fucked quite a few blondes in a very media-effective way over the years. What do you call that, if not disrespecting Sofia?”

He had a point, but I would not admit it. “That was a long time before the wedding, not to mention that I didn’t intend for anything to get to the press.”

“At least I keep my fucking private,” Samuel snapped.

I ignored his comment. “And what the fuck were you thinking letting Emma sit all by herself while everyone danced? As her fiancé, it’s your duty to keep her company. She’ll realize you don’t want her if you keep it up.”

“I went over to her and asked her if she wanted my company, but she told me to go dance. And maybe you should focus on making sure Sofia is happy. She is your wife, and so far, you’ve been a shitty fiancé. I don’t have much hope for your abilities as a husband. It was fucking embarrassing how you kept chasing those blonde girls like a little pussy who can’t get over being dumped.”

I slammed my elbow against his throat. “Maybe I just like fucking blondes, Samuel. I’m not the one who’s been moping for years now because my sister chose the enemy and not her supposed brotherly soulmate.”

Samuel shoved me back, and soon we were grappling.

“What are you doing?” Sofia’s horrified voice made us jump apart.

I cleared my throat and straightened my suit and tie. Samuel did the same, but not without sending me a death glare. As if that had any effect on me.

“Why are you fighting like a pair of five-year-olds?” Sofia asked, stepping between us as if she was worried we might be at each other’s throat again if she didn’t.

“We just had a small dispute. Nothing for you to worry about,” I said.

She shook her head and glanced at Samuel. “Maybe you should go to Emma.” Her voice was stern, and to my surprise, he left without another word.

Sofia turned to me. Now that we were alone, some of her confidence waned. She was definitely nervous about being alone with me.

“This shouldn’t have happened at our wedding,” I said as my version of an apology.

“You’re right. There are quite a few *shouldn’t-have-happeneds* in our past. Maybe we should try to minimize them.”

“Things aren’t always as easy as you might think. The world isn’t black and white.”

She huffed. “I know what the world is like, don’t worry. I’m not a naïve eleven-year-old anymore.”

“Remo destroyed more than one life.”

“Maybe Remo began the process of tearing down my innocent view on the world, but you finished the job five months ago.” Her lips formed a thin line as soon as the words were out, her eyes growing wide.

I froze. I couldn’t believe she was comparing me to that man. I moved very close to her until she had to tilt her head back. “Don’t compare me to that monster. I’m nothing like him.”

“I don’t know who you are,” she whispered. “I thought I did but that night I saw a side of you I wished didn’t exist.”

“I never meant to hurt you. If I’d known it was you under that wig, I would have never laid hand on you.”

“I know,” she said bitterly. “If you’d known it was me, you would have ignored me like you have all these years.”

I shook my head. “You were a kid.”

“I wasn’t Serafina.”

My pulse spiked as it always did when I heard that name and the familiar wave of fury washed through me. I felt the

almost irresistible urge to push Sofia against the wall and kiss her then slide my hand under her skirt and have my fucking way with her.

Anna appeared in the doorway, glancing between Sofia and me. “Can I have a word with you, Sofia?”

I stepped back from my wife, shoving my hands into my pockets. Anna slanted me a curious look.

Sofia nodded almost dazedly. A flicker of unease reflected on her face—a look I’d created. Fuck. I needed to keep myself in check around her. I’d already fucked up majorly once. I needed to stay in control and be the gentleman Sofia expected.

She disappeared with Anna without another word. It didn’t take a genius to know the girls would be talking about me.

Of course, Pietro intercepted me on my way back to the party.

“Can I have a word with you?” There was an edge to his voice.

I wasn’t in the mood for a worried-father lecture but offending my father-in-law on my wedding day wasn’t on my agenda, either, so I followed him back out into the courtyard. He took out two cigars and held one out to me. “Cuban. The best you can get. One won’t kill you.”

I took the cigar. Pietro took out his knife and cut off the end of his cigar then off mine. I suppressed a snort at this gesture. I had a feeling taking out his knife was supposed to send a silent warning. We smoked our cigars in silence for a couple of minutes before Pietro finally cut to the chase. “I couldn’t protect one daughter, but I’m determined to protect Sofia.” I didn’t miss his avoidance of Serafina’s name.

“Sofia’s my wife, and I can assure you, I’ll protect her, and if you worry that you’ll have to protect her from me, I swear you won’t have to. Have I ever given you a reason to doubt me?”

Pietro slowly shook his head. I wondered how this conversation would have gone if I'd admitted to the party incident. I had a feeling Pietro would have had a hard time not using his knife on me. "Samuel mentioned some concerns regarding your conduct with other women in the past."

I'd kill him. "There's a difference between those women and my wife. Not to mention that those women were into it, so even with them, I have nothing to feel guilty for."

Pietro sighed and took another deep drag of his cigar. "Sofia is infatuated with you. That's a consolation. Just don't fuck it up."

A little too late for that warning.

I nodded.

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FIFTEEN

It had been there again. That predatory look in Danilo's eyes. This time it had been directed at me, but was I really the source of his passion? After all, he had turned into this unhinged version of himself the moment I mentioned Serafina, as if only her name could tease emotions out of him that I couldn't. Anna's fingers clamped around my wrist as she dragged me toward the restrooms. Once we were inside and alone, she turned to me with a look of concern. "What was going on?"

"Our first argument as a married couple," I said with a small shrug, trying to play it down.

"He looked pissed, and you looked scared."

"It's nothing. He just reminded me of that night for a moment."

The door swung open and two girls I was distantly related to came in, giggling. Anna and I pretend to reapply our makeup. The girls gave us shy smiles then quickly rushed back out after they'd gone to the toilet. Anna often had that effect on people.

Anna propped her hip against the sink and gave me that motherly look she could adopt. "Do I have to worry about

you tonight?”

I rolled my eyes. “Danilo is my husband. Unless I mention Fina, I won’t get his heart rate up, or anything else, don’t worry.”

Anna narrowed her eyes in contemplation. “That’s what I’m worried about. Listen, Sofia, I know you hoped for fireworks between you and Danilo the moment you married, but arranged marriages aren’t like that. It takes work. It’s a good thing that Danilo treats you with respect because that’s what a husband should do.”

“I like that he treats me with respect, but does he have to be so . . . detached? It’s like it’s not even difficult for him to be a gentleman because he doesn’t have any indecent thoughts about me.”

“The way he just looked at you was anything but decent,” Anna said with a laugh.

“Yeah, because I mentioned Fina.”

“Maybe you should stop mentioning her.”

She was right. I was like a broken record when it came to my sister. “I know.”

Anna checked her watch. “It’s almost nine. The wedding cake will be rolled in soon. You can’t miss it.”

We headed back to the party. Mom caught my eye the second I stepped in, obviously worried. I’d been gone for a while. She leaned in when I arrived at our table. “Is anything the matter?”

I smiled. “No, Anna and I just had a chat.”

A knowing look passed Mom’s face. She probably thought Anna and I had talked about my wedding night, which was technically the truth. “I’m sure Valentina would have a chat with you as well. She’s already married, after all.”

I quickly shook my head. A sex talk with my aunt was the last thing I needed. Luckily, the lights dimmed. Danilo headed my way. I hadn’t noticed him before. He held out his hand, that polite smile of his back in place. I put my fingers into his and he gently closed his hand around them. It felt

good holding hands with him. It always had. I kept glancing up to him as we headed to the center of the room where the cake would be presented. Applause sounded when a few waiters rolled in the table with the four-level wedding cake. At the very top were two small figurines, a bride with brown hair and her groom.

Danilo and I cut the cake, and then fed each other a piece. The chocolate cream melted on my tongue. This was the last scheduled point for our wedding. After that, we were free to retire to consummate the marriage. My belly flopped with nerves. Danilo must have seen something because he leaned down to whisper in my ear. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t,” I said quickly. Too quickly.

Danilo straightened because our guests had gathered around the table so we could serve them cake. After fifteen minutes, the waiters took over from us and we returned to our table. Our family was eating cake and chatting, looking relaxed and happy. Even Dad and Samuel had lost their vigilant demeanor. The alcohol probably accounted for that.

We took our seats and Danilo easily fell into the conversation, but my mind was far away. I poked at my cake and jumped when Danilo touched my back. “How about we retire? You look tired.”

I was exhausted but adrenaline pumped through my veins at his words. Still, I nodded with a small smile. It was ridiculous to postpone the inevitable.

Danilo turned to our family. “If you’ll excuse us, we’d like to retire.”

Dad and Samuel stood immediately and the look they sent Danilo made my cheeks flush with heat. Danilo, however, ignored their attempts to kill him with their eyes. Mom hugged me embarrassingly long as if we wouldn’t see each other again in the morning.

Anna caught my eye. I gave her a firm smile.

Danilo grazed my back and led me away from our guests. The rest of the room had caught up on our leaving by now and formed a tunnel and clapped as they led us out. Some of the men winked at Danilo or whisper-shouted something at him that I luckily didn't catch.

I was relieved when we were out of the ballroom and in the quiet hallway. Danilo led me to the underground garage where he'd parked his car. We wouldn't spend the night in the hotel suite, even though we'd booked it. Instead we'd drive to the Mancini mansion, my future home.

Danilo slanted me the occasional look, but I kept my eyes straight ahead, trying to appear composed and poised, trying to be everything I wasn't. He held the door open for me and I slipped into the seat. It took a couple of minutes for me to gather my skirt around me, then Danilo closed the door and took his seat behind the steering wheel.

When he started the engine, music started playing. It wasn't anything I was familiar with. I was more of a Top 100s kind of music-listener, but this seemed an older piece.

"Do you want me to turn it down?" Danilo asked as he steered the car away from the hotel. A few guests, my family and Anna among them, waved us off. I waved back at them with a smile. Anna gave me a thumbs up, which elicited a grin from me.

She was right. Tonight, was in my control. I didn't have to accept whatever fate had in store for me like a damsel in distress. I'd actually been looking forward to being with Danilo. I wouldn't let the party debacle ruin this for me.

"Sofia?" Danilo's voice was concerned as he darted me a glance before turning his attention back to traffic.

"No, I like listening to music," I said, glad for the deep male voice ringing from the speakers and filling the car. Without it, Danilo and I would have had to talk, and I wasn't in a state of mind to conduct halfway interesting small talk.

Danilo nodded.

The music had a melancholic, almost dreary feel to it. Not the music I would have chosen for my wedding day, but perhaps it reflected Danilo's feelings.

"Who is it?" I asked eventually, more to distract myself from my nerve-racking thoughts than anything else.

"Depeche Mode."

I nodded as if I was familiar with the band but I'd actually never heard of them, and judging by the two songs I'd heard, they weren't the type of musicians I'd listen to by choice.

"They sound depressed." The moment the words were out of my mouth, I could have kicked myself. I didn't want to know why Danilo listened to this kind of music.

He considered that as if he hadn't noticed. "I never saw it that way."

After that, silence fell over us again and I chose to focus on the street and not my husband.

My husband. I'd waited for so long to call Danilo my husband, and now the expected joy didn't come.

Danilo pulled up in front of his mansion. I'd never been there before. It was a beautiful three-story estate with arched windows on the second floor and stone steps sweeping up to the wooden front door. It was too dark to make out the exact color, but it looked to be a light sandstone.

"This was my grandparents' home. It's the original Mancini family estate. My parents moved into their own home when they got married."

I nodded, wondering how many maids were needed to clean this house. From the size of it, I'd guess it had at least forty rooms, probably more.

Danilo parked in the driveway, got out, and opened my door for me. I took his outstretched hand and let him lead me into the house. It was quiet and deserted. The silence gave room for my anxiety, but I tried to ignore it.

We didn’t talk as Danilo guided me up the white marble stairs toward the master bedroom. Always the gentleman, Danilo opened the door for me, motioning for me to go inside. At least, he was a gentleman to me. But I remembered his other side. His angry, unrestrained side. I gave him a tight smile and stepped inside the bedroom. With a soft click, the door closed behind me and we were alone. Completely alone for the first time since our horrid encounter five months ago.

I linked my fingers to stop them from shaking and took my time to take in the room. The floor and furniture were made from dark wood, a very understated design. There was nothing inviting to the room. It was meant for practical purposes, not for comfort or even relaxation. My eyes briefly darted to the bed, a king-sized dark wood piece with simple gray linen.

Panic bubbled up inside me.

Despite my attraction to him, I feared being with him again. He’d been frightening during our last encounter, and the pain . . . the pain was still fresh in my mind. I had been sore for days. He hadn’t been how I’d envisioned him to be—gentle and loving, whispering words of adoration. Maybe first times were never like that. Maybe they were doomed to be horrific, but that wasn’t any consolation.

Silence still reigned between us, but this time no melancholic music could cover it up. My breathing sounded loud. I dared to look at Danilo. He stood close to the door, regarding me with a small frown, as if he wasn’t quite sure what to do with me now that he had me alone. His hands were pushed into his pockets. Tall and handsome, a man who had experience with women and had been ruling over his men for many years.

Maybe my worry was unfounded. He didn’t feel strong passion toward me. The past wouldn’t repeat itself, and somehow that, too, depressed me. I wanted passion, not just the fury-fueled passion of our last encounter. I wanted

searing kisses and torn-apart shirts, flying buttons, and ripped panties.

Danilo strode toward me, causing me to knead my fingers harder. His eyes took in my hair. “I usually prefer your hair down, but this style really suits you. It makes you look like a lady.”

“It was meant to make me look sophisticated,” I said quietly, my voice shaking.

Danilo nodded slowly. His eyes seemed to see straight into my brain, which only made me more nervous. He reached for me and touched my arm, stroking up from my elbow to my shoulder over the thin fabric of my sleeve. I stiffened, even though the touch felt wonderful, but my body replayed other images. The truth was, I didn’t know the man in front of me. There was no beautiful memories, and the one major memory we shared wasn’t pleasant. The only thing I knew about him was that he wanted someone else, probably still my sister.

Danilo removed his hand from my arm and cupped my head before he pressed a soft kiss to my forehead as if I were a little child. “It’s been a long day. Get changed, and then we’ll go to sleep.”

Danilo didn’t want to touch me. Because it wasn’t me he wanted, not my body he wanted to claim, not my face he wanted to wake up beside. “Would you like me to get ready first?”

I almost preferred our painful first intimacy, anything was better than his ignorance, this feeling of being less than he wanted no matter how hard I tried to be enough.

I’d sworn to myself not to care, but I cared a lot. I wanted his desire, his love, his passion. Everything.

I nodded jerkily and walked into the bathroom, locking the door after me. I didn’t recognize the girl in the mirror, an occurrence that seemed to repeat itself lately. A bride in her beautiful dress with hopeless, jaded eyes. I’d always thought I’d be delirious with happiness on my wedding day.

Even in arranged marriages, the husband usually desired the wife and couldn’t wait to claim her. But Danilo didn’t even want me in that regard, much less the way I wanted him. Searing kisses and ripped panties . . . a bitter smile twisted my mouth at my idiotic fantasies.

A maid must have laid out my nightgown for the night. It was neatly folded on a small stool in the corner beside the freestanding bathtub. A beautiful, sexy silk piece with lace trimming in red. A color that suited me very well, Anna had assured me. I slipped out of my wedding dress, realizing that this was it. The day I’d been dreaming about since I was a little girl had come and gone, and I felt horrible. Tears pooled in my eyes and trickled down my cheeks as I removed my garters and underwear. After a quick shower, I put on my nightgown and the matching lace panties. Looking into the mirror, I felt like a fraud in the sexy garment. The red was daring and seductive, meant to show Danilo what he now had. Instead, it only reminded me how hard I was trying. He wouldn’t care if I walked out naked, why would he care if I wore sexy lingerie?

Bracing myself, I stepped back into the bedroom. Danilo had removed his jacket and checked his phone. He put it down on his nightstand when he heard me and looked my way. Something flickered in his eyes, something that gave me hope, but then his disinterested gentlemanly mask was back, and I wondered if I’d imagined the flicker.

“Why don’t you go ahead and try to sleep. I’ll take a long shower. It’ll be a while.”

I walked closer to him, still hoping. He gave me a tight smile, barely looking at me as he went to the bathroom.

I’d loved him innocently, wholly, desperately with my stupid naïve heart.

Could I learn to hate him with the same passion?

It was a matter of survival.

I couldn’t take it. His disinterest, how he avoided looking at me as if the sight of me was repulsive, as if he couldn’t

bear it for even a second.

“Won’t you claim me before someone else can? I thought Serafina’s kidnapping taught you a lesson,” I blurted. I couldn’t believe those words had come out of my mouth, but at the same time it felt good to release some steam. I felt like I might burst any moment.

He whirled around in the doorway to the bathroom, his eyes flashing with anger from the past. “What?”

“Just because I’m married doesn’t mean someone else won’t claim me. Don’t you want to mark me as yours?”

I felt almost lightheaded with despair. I didn’t want a repeat performance of what had happened at the party, but I didn’t want this passionless gentleman, either. I wanted passion and love, tenderness and lust. I wanted Danilo fully to myself. I wanted him to forget what was and realize what he had.

Danilo moved closer again. His nostrils flared, a vein in his temple throbbing. This was his weak spot: Serafina.

“Remo didn’t hesitate and look what he got.”

His anger flared even hotter. It was better than his blank expression—anything was better than that. He bridged the distance between us in two long strides, grabbed my upper arms, and pulled me against him.

Fear pulsed through me, but I couldn’t back off now. I didn’t want to. This anger was so close to passion. I hungered for more.

“Won’t you take what’s yours?” I said, hoping Danilo couldn’t hear the tremor in my voice.

His smile was harsh. “Not as long as you look at me like that,” he growled.

Like what?

“Aren’t you a man who takes what he wants?”

Danilo pulled me even closer until our chests were pressed against each other. His heart was pounding even harder than mine, and it felt good to know this controlled man could be unhinged so easily by a few words from

stupid, naïve me. His grip was tight but not painful. “What are you doing, Sofia?”

His voice was drenched with warning and his eyes burned me with their intensity. I felt his emotions in every fiber of my body, and even if they weren’t the emotions I wanted, I drank them in hungrily. But I could see his anger waning, his fingers loosening.

“Maybe you need me to put on a blonde wig like last time. Maybe then you can finish what you started at the party.”

His grip tightened. “Taking you up against that tree. Blinded by anger. That’s not what I promised your family, not what I promised myself.”

I swallowed. I was losing him, his fury, his passionate hatred, and I didn’t want that. I could see myself getting drunk on his fiery hatred, could see myself pretending it was angry lust. I wanted something, anything. I wanted to feel like I had some kind of power over him, even if it was only over his anger.

“Remo took what he wanted, and he got everything. He laughed in your face and you let him,” I bit out.

Danilo didn’t let me finish. He shoved me back, and I landed on the bed, then he climbed on top of me. “Is that what you want? To be fucked in anger? Wasn’t last time enough? Is that what you want?”

His body pressed me down and even through the fabric of my nightgown I could feel his growing erection. “Is that what you want?” he snarled. His eyes were wild with anger, but pain lurked in their depths. Was this hurting him as much as it hurt me?

My chest constricted with unease. I wanted lovemaking and a beautiful fairytale. I was too old to believe in the latter, too realistic to hope for the former.

Some of the anger drained from his expression, regret passing his face and he began to push himself off me. My nails dug into the expensive material of his shirt, wishing it

was his skin, desperate to draw blood and give him some of my pain.

I didn’t want him to pull away. I wanted Danilo. I wanted some part of him. Anything. “Remo will always win because he takes what he wants without regard for anyone. He took Fina. Her heart. Her virginity. He took everything.”

Danilo loomed over me, the anger slamming back into place, his breathing becoming louder. “Stop mentioning his name, Sofia.”

“Why? Because he got what you wanted, and now you’re left with someone you don’t want? Someone you don’t even want to touch, much less fuck.” The word burned my tongue and I had to stop myself from grimacing. It wasn’t a word I’d used before. It felt wrong in my mouth.

Danilo shook his head, his body pressing harder into me.

“Take me before someone else does,” I whispered harshly. It was a ridiculous thing to say. No one would touch me, not with Danilo’s safety measures regarding me, but it cut into the wound Remo’s attack had left, opening it up again.

Danilo’s lips came down on mine, but I turned my head away, not wanting a kiss full of anger. My first kiss would be romantic and beautiful, even if that meant it would never happen. He breathed harshly into my ears. “You don’t want this.”

“I do! Don’t pretend you know what I want. Just do your duty and fuck your wife. I bet that’s what Remo’s doing now.”

He growled and I could see his control snapping, his fury bursting forth. I doubted it was directed at me, but I could pretend it was. He tore at his belt and pants until they fell open. I didn’t look, scared I’d lose my courage if I did. I only focused on his face, on the beautiful mask of rage, at the fire in his eyes that almost looked like passion if I didn’t look too closely.

Anger and passion were very similar, I realized then. He didn’t bother to remove his shirt or pants before his hands reached under my nightgown and tugged my panties down. He moved his head lower as if he wanted to kiss me between my legs, but I didn’t want that. I didn’t want any kind of tenderness or affection because it wasn’t the real deal. Not like his anger. That was the only honest emotion Danilo could offer me, and I’d soak it up like a sponge.

“No,” I snapped, my hand shooting out to stop him. “Just do it. Fuck me like Remo fucked Fina.” I felt sick uttering those words, but they had the intended effect.

Danilo shoved back up, his eyes burning into mine with unabashed fury as he reached between us and lined himself up. “You’re going to regret this, but I’m done holding back. If being fucked is what you want, then you can have it. If you want me to be like Remo Falcone, then that’s what you get.” The name fell like a curse from his lips. My nails dug into Danilo’s shoulders, bracing for what was to come, daring him to put an end to this, to us.

Our eyes were locked and the wave of emotion in his held me captive. He looked as if he wanted to destroy everything. Full of anger and pain. His body was stone, frozen. I waited for the pain, wanting to drown in his rage and fury-fueled passion.

I’d fought for his love for years and gotten his anger instead. It had come quick and easy, and I hoped it would kindle my own. I hoped tonight would mark the turning point for me, from love to hatred.

The pain didn’t come. I glared up at Danilo, at the battle in his eyes.

My chest burned with anger and hatred so potent it threatened to make me implode.

Remo. Serafina.

Two names I never wanted to hear ever again. Least of all on my wedding night.

My cock was hard. This was like the anger-fueled fucks of the past, and my body reacted to it as if on autopilot.

Sofia's nails dug deeper into my shoulder and she let a shaky breath. The sound burst through my fog of fury, shoving it aside to give way for reality. My wife. My young wife who deserved so much better than angry fucking. I wouldn't do this to her.

Her blue eyes were frozen on mine. She held my gaze with a fierceness that caught me by surprise.

I froze, panting. What the fuck was I doing? Fuck. Why did she push me? Why did I let my emotions get the better of me? I'd almost fucked her out of anger.

My cock softened, overcome with revulsion at my own behavior and confusion over Sofia's. Her brows furrowed, her lips parted. "What are you doing?" she practically growled. "I thought you wanted to *claim* me."

Now that my fury wasn't leading the show anymore, I detected the insecurity and hurt behind her spiteful tone. I swung my legs out of bed and perched on its edge, far away from my wife. Sofia's sweet scent mingled with my muskier scent.

I stared down at my soft cock, remembering how it had been covered with Sofia's blood after the party. I'd sworn to myself then that I'd always treat her right, and just seconds ago I'd almost let her drive me into fury sex. "Fuck," I muttered, running a hand through my sweat-damp hair. "This shouldn't have happened."

I glanced at Sofia. She still lay on her back, her legs parted. Her body called to me like a siren, her pussy inviting, but I didn't want our sex to be like this, with Sofia like an injured cat clawing at me in despair.

Last time had been excusable. I hadn't known it was her. I'd thought she wanted it . . . but tonight would have been absolutely inexcusable. Even if she'd practically urged me to fuck her, to take her like a fucking animal, I had to control myself. At least until she really wanted this sort of sex. But looking into her pale face, I knew she was as confused as I felt, and whatever she wanted, it wasn't what I'd almost done.

"Sofia," I murmured, trying to form words to make sense of the situation. "This . . . what almost happened. It won't happen again." It wasn't enough.

Sofia's gaze snapped to me, hurt and anger crossing her beautiful face. "Sleeping with your surrogate bride?"

She scrambled to her side of the bed and swung her legs out. Her shoulders were stiff. I reached for her, my fingers brushing her skin, but she jerked away. "You should have done what I wanted."

"Don't lie to me. I'm not blind. I could see in your eyes that you didn't want our first time to go like this."

"First time?" she scoffed.

"That doesn't count," I said firmly. Fuck, I hadn't even been fully in.

She scowled at me, her eyes were glassy. "You don't know what I want, so don't pretend you didn't claim me tonight because my eyes told you I didn't want it. You didn't want it."

She shoved to her feet and disappeared in the bathroom, her shoulders stiff and straight. Confused, I gave her room. She obviously didn't want my closeness. I stared down at myself. What the hell was happening? I didn't usually lose control, especially with a woman. I'd promised myself to hold back, to give Sofia all the time she needed before we'd get intimate. I wanted to give her time to forget the events from the party. Instead, I'd almost added even worse memories to the old ones. How had everything spiraled out of control? I didn't understand Sofia's reasoning, not entirely. Why was making me angry her way to handle this?

I loosened my tie and threw it to the ground, followed by my shirt, but I closed my pants. Sofia didn't need to see my cock now.

I waited for her. The sound of running water reached my ears and I moved closer to determine its source. I relaxed when I realized it was the sink not the shower. If Sofia had felt the urge to shower, I'd have felt even worse, even if we didn't have sex. My guilt was an overwhelming presence as it was but beneath it simmered exasperation and frustration over my inability to understand my young wife.

Ten minutes later, Sofia emerged in the same sexy red nightgown, barefoot and without a hint of makeup. She looked innocent and young, but so gorgeous and delicious. I was torn between arousal and guilt. With Sofia, guilt had become a too familiar companion.

She avoided looking at my half-naked state and tried to pass me by on her way to the bed, but I grabbed her wrist. "Are you okay?"

She nodded but still wouldn't look at me. "I'm fine. Just tired."

"Sofia."

"I don't want your pity or your guilt. I wanted your anger and you gave it to me." She tugged at my hold until I released her, and she headed toward the bed. I was at a loss what to say. I wanted to understand her. I wanted her to

be happy in this marriage, but I wasn’t sure it was an option right now. I’d thought only I was haunted by the kidnapping and the events afterwards, but Sofia seemed to carry her own baggage.

I stepped into the bathroom, unsure how to act around my wife. I didn’t understand her or her motives. What did she expect from me?

Not angry fucking.

I’d been with enough women to know that she wouldn’t enjoy the rough play. She’d taunted me to test me, and I’d failed her test.

When I returned to the bedroom after a quick shower to wash away the sweat, Sofia lay on her side, facing the other wall. Her slender shoulders and neck didn’t shake like they would have if she were crying. That realization offered little consolation as I stretched out beside her. She tensed, as if she feared what I’d do next, as if she thought I might have a go at her at all. I wouldn’t even have tried to sleep with her if it weren’t for her provocation, and I definitely wouldn’t try anything now that I realized Sofia wanted something else. I touched her arm and turned her around to me, needing to see her expression. “Sofia, say something. I need to understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand,” she said, meeting my gaze stubbornly, but she wasn’t as good at hiding her emotions as me. I could see the turmoil and hurt swirling in her blue eyes.

“If you didn’t want to have sex, why did you ask me to fuck you? Why the provocation?”

“I wanted you to consummate our marriage. I wanted sex. You obviously didn’t. End of story,” she said almost angrily.

I wasn’t sure if enjoyment was the right word to describe what I would have felt if I’d really fucked Sofia. My anger had been too strong, eating me up from the inside. “I was

driven by anger. That’s not how it’s supposed to be. You should enjoy it, too.”

She stared stubbornly at my chest. I touched her chin to nudge her face up, but she pulled away.

“I don’t understand what you want me to do.”

“You never wanted to marry me,” she said quietly, her voice wavering. She pressed her lips together.

I frowned. “I chose to marry you.”

“For tactical purposes.”

“Arranged marriages are standard in our world, you know that. Almost everyone marries for political reasons.”

“But you wanted my sister for more than tactical purposes.”

Frustration stormed in my chest. I was tired of hearing that name, tired of everything it was linked to, but I shoved my anger down. It had done enough. I wouldn’t lose control around Sofia ever again. “I don’t want to talk about her ever again, Sofia. We are married now, so whatever I might have wanted is irrelevant. You are my wife.”

She nodded, but I wasn’t sure if she really got it. She looked resigned, not accepting.

“It’s been a long day. How about we get some rest. We’ll talk about this more tomorrow.”

“Okay,” she said in a tone that suggested she didn’t care. I leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to her mouth. She searched my eyes, brows pulling together, then she turned around. I extinguished the lights. I decided against wrapping my arms around her, given her previous reaction to my touch.

I couldn’t fall asleep, and for a long time neither could Sofia, but eventually she must have thought I had drifted off because she began crying. At first, I didn’t realize I heard sobs because she must have muffled them in the pillow but soon it was unmistakable.

I considered pulling her toward me, but she thought I was asleep. She’d feel caught if I showed I was awake. So, I

listened to my wife’s sobbing, knowing I was the source of her anguish.

I’d tried to keep my distance to Sofia over the years. In the beginning it was because I was struggling with everything that had happened, and then later because it seemed the appropriate thing to do given her age, especially when my fiancée developed curves and I stopped seeing her as a child.

She was young and deserved to be treated accordingly. I kept our contact to a minimum to avoid temptation, especially because Sofia was so obviously drawn to me. I was a bad man, but Sofia only deserved to see my best side. Not the hungry, dark, angry side. Not the one that had wanted to claim her even when she was still out of bounds. I’d thought I was doing right by her, protecting her, but she misunderstood my actions, took them as rejection.

And after the thing at the party . . . Fuck. That was the only reason why I hadn’t devoured her the second we were alone in our bedroom like I’d wanted to do for almost two years, even if I wasn’t proud of it. I’d held back my fucking desire to protect her, but she’d thought I’d rejected her.

Eventually, Sofia’s sobbing quieted and her breathing evened out. I tilted my head toward her, even though I could only make out the silhouette of her body in the dim moonlight.

My mother had loved my father with all her heart, still loved and missed him every day. It was a bond I’d always hoped for. Their marriage had also been arranged, but they’d found love along the way.

I wanted that chance. Maybe I’d messed up badly, but knowing Sofia, she’d give me the opportunity to make things right. I could only hope there was a way I could.

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SIXTEEN

I woke with a warm presence at my back. It took me a couple of heartbeats to remember where I was and who the person behind me was. Danilo had his arm wrapped around me and his scent surrounded me. I relished at being held by him. It was what I'd always longed for, and it still was.

My sleep had been fitful, replaying the events of the previous day. I'd tried so many things to get his attention over the years, but my attack on his wounded pride had captured it fully. His anger and despair had hit me like a tidal wave, with almost crushing abandon. His anger wasn't what I wanted, but it was better than the alternative, better than his gentlemanly distance, the heart-crushing disinterest. I wanted to be respected and loved, but more than that, I wanted to be seen, to be in control for once. Pushing Danilo, forcing a reaction out of him, had given me that brief moment of control.

Few things in my life had been in my control. Not my life, not my future, least of all my heart. I blinked against the brightness of the early morning sun. Despite my harsh words, my provocation, Danilo had pulled away. Even in a rampant rage, he hadn't claimed me. I was done. If he didn't

want me, then that was his problem. I wouldn't try to get his attention again. And yet, I didn't regret last night. It had given me a sense of final loss, as if I could let go of Danilo and my childish hope for love. I was done pining for him.

I turned around. Danilo rolled over on his back, still asleep. His hair was all over the place. He was gorgeous. The blanket pooled at his hips, revealing his muscled chest and a fine trail of hair disappearing in his boxers. Judging by the tent the blanket formed over his crotch, he was aroused.

I slid toward the edge of the bed and stood. I needed to do something, to keep myself busy before what happened could drag me down. I'd made plans with Anna to meet for lunch. Our mothers, little Bea, and Emma and Mrs. Mancini would be present as well. I'd worried Danilo would be disappointed if I went off on our first day as a married couple, now I was relieved to be gone for a while.

Danilo woke with a start, knifing up in the bed. "Sofia, what are you doing?"

I grabbed my bathrobe and put it over my nightgown before I slanted him a look. I didn't allow his tousled look to warm my heart, shutting it off with every ounce of self-control I had. "I'm going to take a shower, and then I'll go looking for breakfast."

I forced a smile and headed for the bathroom but before I could close the door, Danilo had crossed the room and held the door open.

He searched my face, looking so openly confused that some of my anger slipped away, but I clung to the rest. I didn't want to be forgiving.

"Don't avoid me. We need to talk."

"Talk about what?"

"About last night, about the party, about our marriage and what you expect from it. We're both part of this bond, and I won't let you run from it."

"I'm not running from it. I'm just tired of investing too much in it when you don't. I won't allow myself to feel

anything for you anymore. It's your turn. I'm just done."

Danilo pushed the door open further and stepped closer to me. How could he smell this good early in the morning? So warm and musky? He cupped my face. I didn't pull back, but I didn't let the touch soften me either. "Sofia, you don't even know me, how can you have feelings for me?"

My chest tightened at his words. Anna had said the same thing, and I realized now that what I felt wasn't really love, but I was *in love* with him. "You loved my sister even though you didn't know her."

He let out a dark laugh, a dimple flashing in his cheek. "I didn't love her. I wanted to possess her. I didn't know her, either. Love doesn't work from a distance. You can only love whom you know. Love means work and dedication, but most of all, time."

His words were firm, no hint of hesitation. I was surprised by his vision of love, even if it reflected what my mother had once told me. Maybe I'd been naïve to hope for love to come easily, served on a silver platter so I could feast on it.

I didn't say anything. It was too much at once, and I still wasn't sure I could believe him. Actions always spoke louder than words. He'd been with those blonde women for a reason, if it wasn't longing for my sister, then what was it?

Danilo took a deep breath. "I never got the chance to get to know you, and you never got the chance to get to know me. Shouldn't we start getting to know each other? That would be a good start to this marriage."

"Last night was the start of our marriage," I said, not willing to give in, even if he sounded reasonable. Maybe I had been foolish to invest feelings so early on, but that didn't mean his actions were less hurtful.

"I should have controlled myself."

"I didn't want you to, and yet you did." I'd provoked him to get a reaction out of him, to unleash his anger. That's why I wasn't even really mad at him for last night, not for his rage, for losing control. I was hurt because he was able

to control himself. If that wasn’t crazy, I didn’t know what was. I was just disappointed and sad because my dreams of a happy marriage seemed so far away.

He frowned as if nothing I said made sense to him. Was it a man thing? A Danilo thing? Or maybe a Sofia thing? “I didn’t want you to control yourself,” I growled.

“Fuck, Sofia, you’re driving me insane. I’m not an idiot. I could tell you didn’t want me to mount you like an animal. You want lovemaking, so why did you provoke me?”

Lovemaking? Was that even an option? “Because your hatred is better than your disinterest. You could barely look at me!”

He shook his head. “I didn’t look at you because I wanted you, but you couldn’t bear my touch and you were scared because of the party. I acted like a gentleman because I didn’t want to force you when you were still suffering from our first encounter! I held back to show you I cared about this marriage and you. If I’d known you’d take it as proof that I don’t desire you, I’d have ripped your clothes off, buried my face between your legs and then fucked you.” His nostrils flared, his face contorting with frustration.

I blinked up at him. “You desire me?”

“Of course, I do. I’m not blind, Sofia. You’re a gorgeous woman. Any man would desire you,” he murmured, his eyes trailing lower to the lace-trimming over the swell of my breasts. “Give me a chance to make it up to you, Sofia. Let us work on our marriage. This is just the beginning of our life together. Our parents had good marriages, and I want the same.”

I stepped back, needing to create distance between us. I was too eager to dive headfirst into this again, to give my all for a chance at a happy marriage, but I needed to be careful if I wanted to protect myself. “I don’t know what to say right now. I’m just too overwhelmed.”

“I know,” he said in a low voice. With him so close, especially shirtless, in only low-cut boxers, it was difficult to

focus. Maybe I hadn’t wanted the angry fucking like he said, but I wanted to be with him. “I’ll give you all the time you need, and I’m going to make up for my mistakes, especially your messed up first time.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Let me try. Why don’t we go back to bed and I’ll make it up to you? I took the day off. We have plenty of time.”

Suddenly, I realized what he meant, and I wished it were as easy as that. My body heated at the prospect of what Danilo wanted to do, but my brain put a stopper to it. I shook my head. “It’s not just the physical side. I can’t be close to you right now. I need time to figure things out, to get to know you, like you said.”

Danilo nodded, but I didn’t miss the disappointment that flickered across his face. “Then let’s spend the day together getting to know each other.”

I looked away from him, trying to determine if that’s what I wanted. Maybe I needed space. “I made plans with Anna and the other women in our family for lunch before everyone leaves Indianapolis. I can’t cancel it. I’m sure my father and the other men won’t mind a meeting with you as well.”

Danilo sighed but nodded. It was obvious that he didn’t like the idea of us being apart today. Maybe he realized I was on the verge of slipping away and wanted to make sure I couldn’t. “As long as you take Carlo with you, you can meet with Anna and the women for lunch. I won’t lock you in at home. But lunch is still some time away. So, what about breakfast together and a tour of the house before you leave?”

“Okay,” I agreed. “But I’d like to shower first.” He stepped back and I closed the door. I felt relief that Danilo obviously wanted to work on our marriage, but I didn’t want to put my heart and hope in it too soon again. I’d be careful. I’d set ground rules and keep my own wishes in mind.

When I left the bathroom twenty minutes later after a long mind-clearing shower, Danilo was lounging in bed, reading something on his phone. A tray loaded with food, coffee, and orange juice sat on the bed beside him. I was only in my bathrobe, but the scent of fresh coffee drew me toward the bed. Pancakes and fresh fruit as well as scrambled eggs smelled divine and made me realize I hadn't eaten in a while.

I sank down on the bed, feeling insecure about joining Danilo. He put away his phone and motioned at the tray. "I made us some breakfast."

I gaped at him. "You made breakfast?"

A smile flickered across his face. That and the slight stubble made him look like a guy next door, a very handsome guy next door.

"I've been living on my own for a while, and I prefer to have the house to myself in the morning. My maids usually come around ten to eleven when I'm gone for work."

"Did Emma never cook for you?"

Usually the women cooked, and until shortly before our wedding, Emma had still lived with Danilo after all. Not that I was a good cook, or any kind of cook. I'd never tried my hand at it.

"Emma's a lousy cook, and she hates it."

"Samuel's going to be in for a surprise," I said with a delighted laugh. My brother probably thought Emma would present him with a beautiful home-cooked dinner every night.

"He'll need a maid or do the cooking himself," Danilo muttered.

I slanted a curious look at Danilo. He'd never struck me as a man who would set foot in the kitchen.

I took one of the forks and cut off a bite sized piece of pancake, a bit wary about Danilo's cooking skills. I was surprised that it was delicious. Fluffy and sweet with a hint

of vanilla. “It’s good,” I attested, already bringing another bite to my mouth.

“Come, join me properly,” he said, patting the spot beside him.

I crept under the blanket and Danilo positioned the tray between us so we could both eat from it. He drank his coffee, watching me.

I felt self-conscious under his scrutiny and decided to face him head-on.

“I know you probably don’t want to talk about it, but I need to know that you’re okay after last night.”

I took a sip of orange juice. “I am. I was expecting your anger, so I’m not emotionally scarred, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Danilo shook his head. “Okay. I messed up twice, but there won’t be a third time.”

“It’s in the past,” I said simply. “You can do better now.”

We ate in silence, but it wasn’t as awkward as I feared, even if it was obvious that we didn’t really know how to handle each other. When I was done with eating, I turned to him. “What do you expect from me as your wife? You’re Underboss, so you have many responsibilities. Do you need me to handle certain things?”

Danilo looked thoughtful. “I haven’t given it much thought. I want you at my side for public events, of course, but I’d appreciate it if you’d get along with my mother, and if you’d meet with the Captains’ wives now and then. They have a brunch date once a week, if I remember correctly. My mother attends it as well, so she can help you.”

Those were the typical social responsibilities. “Anything else?” I wanted something to focus on outside of this marriage, so I didn’t feel too pressured about making it work as quickly as possible.

Danilo shook his head, but I could tell there was something else.

“Tell me,” I said.

“Emma was active in an organization that helped disabled children from less fortunate families. She organized fundraisers and tried to create awareness about the realities of people with disabilities. Now that she’ll be moving to Minneapolis to live with your brother, she won’t be able to continue her work.”

I didn’t miss the edge in his voice when he mentioned Samuel, but I chose not to ask him about it. “Can’t I continue her work? I know I’m not disabled, so maybe the kids won’t identify with me like they did with Emma, but I’d love to help. It sounds like a worthy cause.” Better than entertaining bored mob wives.

“Emma would appreciate it, and so would I.” He reached for my hand, and I let him take it. “I want you to really arrive in Indianapolis and see it as your home.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said. I didn’t know the city yet. I hadn’t seen anything except the brief glimpses of the city on our drive to the house.

“Is there anything you want to do? I work a lot. Do you have a hobby you’d like to keep up, or anything else you’d like to pursue?”

I considered that. Anna was starting college in Chicago this fall but she was one of the few allowed to do so. Given Danilo’s past experiences with my sister, I doubted he’d like me being on a campus every day.

“I like aerobics and swimming, but that’s not really something I’m pursuing as more than a hobby. But maybe I could start by learning to cook? I feel at a disadvantage since my husband can cook, and I can’t.”

Danilo’s mouth twitched. “I won’t say no to that. We have a few fine dining restaurants in our portfolio. I could ask one of the chefs to come over and teach you.”

“That sounds good,” I said. I could already imagine Anna rolling her eyes at me for wanting to learn to cook, but it was a start. Once I’d found my place in Indianapolis and didn’t feel quite so lost anymore, I could figure out what to

do. “I’m thinking about taking a few college courses next semester.”

Danilo looked surprised. “All right. What did you have in mind?”

I hadn’t expected him to be open to the suggestion, so I hadn’t really put much thought into it. Maybe his desire to make it up to me was why he was so open-minded. “Maybe creative writing.” I’d always had a colorful imagination, and even if most of my scribblings couldn’t be considered literature, I liked the idea of creating art with words one day.

“I suppose you’d have to wait for the spring semester. If that’s what you want, we’ll figure it out. A bodyguard would have to be with you at all times, of course.”

“Of course.” I searched his face, trying to figure out if he was only agreeing to placate me or if he was being serious, but his expression didn’t give anything away.

He met my eyes, and I flushed. I wasn’t even sure why. We were close and he was half-naked.

“As for your swimming, there’s an indoor pool on the first floor.”

“Really?” I asked excitedly. We never had a pool at our mansion, so I always had to let Samuel drive me to a swimming pool in an Outfit-owned gym. He refused to let the bodyguards accompany me because then they’d have seen me in a bathing suit.

Danilo reached for me and brushed a strand of hair from my cheek. “You’ve got a bit of syrup on your cheek,” he said roughly.

I flushed and pulled back, wary of my body’s reaction to the fleeting touch. My heartrate had picked up and heat raced through me. “I’ll wash it off. Will you show me the pool?”

He dropped his hand, his smile wavering. “Of course. Just let me grab a shower first.”

We got out of bed, and after I’d wiped the syrup off my cheek, Danilo headed into the bathroom. To my surprise, he

didn’t close the door but left it ajar. I got dressed in one of my favorite lilac summer dresses and put on some makeup while the shower ran, but eventually curiosity got the better of me and I casually walked by the bathroom, risking a peek inside.

Danilo was in the shower, his eyes closed as he rinsed shampoo from his hair, his head tilted back slightly. Rivulets of water ran down the hard planes of his body down to his cock. My core tightened with a mixture of desire and anxiety. I was curious to know what it would feel like if I allowed Danilo to touch me and make me feel good. How it would feel if he buried his face between my legs like he’d mentioned? Some of my scribblings had been short stories about Danilo and me, and how I imagined our intimate encounters.

My cheeks grew even hotter.

I wouldn’t go down that road for a while. I hurried past the open door and left the bedroom. I hadn’t paid much attention to my surroundings last night, so I had a hard time finding the stairs in the huge house. Eventually, I found myself in a huge living room. Like the bedroom, this room, too, was furnished in a modern, sleek style, contrasting with the old house. My eyes were drawn to the French doors that opened to a beautiful patio and an even more stunning garden with a cascade leading down to a pond. I opened the door and stepped out, following a pathway of white steps down to the pond. Pink and white waterlilies floated peacefully on its surface. I squatted down to touch one of the gorgeous flowers when a huge orange head bobbed out of the water. I cried out in surprise and fell on my butt on the lawn. More heads burst through the surface. Large goldfish from the look of it.

“They’re harmless. They thought you’d feed them.”

I turned my head toward Danilo who headed down to me, obviously stifling amusement. “What are they?”

“Koi fish,” he said. “My father used to collect them. When he died, I took them in. My mother doesn’t like animals much.”

He held out his hand to me, so he could pull me to my feet. I gave him an embarrassed smile, brushing grass from my butt. I tried to see if I still had dirt on my dress but couldn’t twist my head all the way around. Feeling daring, I presented my butt to Danilo and asked, “Did I get all the dirt?”

He took longer than necessary to assess my backside for any stains, then he shook his head and growled, “It looks fine.”

I turned back to the fish and stifled a laugh. More had now gathered near the surface.

Danilo took a box with pellets out from a small wooden box hidden among the reed lining parts of the pond. He poured a small heap on his palm then squatted next to the water. He held his hand in the water, but not deep enough for the pellets to drift away. Immediately several Koi fish appeared and began eating out of his hand.

My eyes widened in surprise and I crouched next to Danilo. “I didn’t know fish could be this tame.”

The corners of Danilo’s mouth twitched. “Koi are the exception. Some of them are more than ten years old. They even have names.”

“What’s his name?” I asked pointing at the biggest Koi with a splattering of white on its back and a white mouth.

“Takeda,” Danilo said. “My father named them after famous Samurai. He admired the codex of the Samurai.”

“I never figured you for a pet person.”

Maybe Danilo was right. I didn’t know enough about him to justify the strong feelings I’d had for him all my life. But I was drawn to him.

He smiled wryly and pulled his hand out of the water. “I’m not, really. I like animals but I don’t really have time for them. Fish aren’t demanding, and I like feeding them after a

long day at work. It calms me down and reminds me of my father.” For a second, it looked like he was embarrassed by his admission.

“I get it. It’s peaceful.”

He held out the box of pellets. “Do you want to try to feed them?”

I bit my lip. “They don’t bite?”

Danilo took my hand and piled fish food on it, then guided my hand into the pond. The water was cooler than expected and goosebumps flashed across my skin. Maybe the cold wasn’t the only reason for my body’s reaction. Danilo’s gentle touch might have had something to do with it as well.

I giggled when the first Koi touched my palm. It was the big one, Takeda. Its strange eyes seemed to fixate on me before he snatched up more food.

They were really careful and watching them fascinated me. I couldn’t take my eyes off them, but Danilo watched me.

I pretended I didn’t notice. I’d longed for his unwavering attention for so long, so I didn’t allow myself to let self-consciousness take the lead.

Danilo and I stayed like that for a while, and I felt a sense of peace I hadn’t felt in forever. I got why Danilo sought this place after a long day of work. I doubted his duties as an Underboss could be classified as peaceful in any regard.

Eventually, when we didn’t have any more food to give them, the Koi began to swim away, diving below the water lilies. “I really love this place.”

Danilo smiled—an honest, less guarded smile. “I’m glad. This is your home. I want you to feel comfortable.”

I glanced around. The garden was vast and meticulously kept. Bushes and stone walls kept it hidden from prying eyes. I could only make out the occasional roof of the surrounding houses, which seemed to be in a similar Victorian style.

“Irvington is an old neighborhood with many beautiful mansions,” Danilo said. “I can show you more of Indianapolis tomorrow.”

“Aren’t you busy with work?” I hadn’t expected a honeymoon, or any kind of attention, really.

Danilo gave me a tight smile. “I blocked the next few days for you. I’ll only have to do a few things I can’t postpone, but I wanted to give us time to get to know each other.”

I bit my lip. I hadn’t expected that. Samuel always called Danilo a workaholic, which was funny since he was the same way, so I’d assumed he’d return to business as usual right after our wedding.

“That sounds good,” I murmured.

We rose and stood across from each other for a moment. Without my heels, Danilo was a head taller and much broader than me. “Can I change things? Like decoration or furniture?”

Danilo hesitated, glancing back to the house. “Sure, but maybe you can tell me your plans beforehand.”

“You don’t have to worry that I’ll turn this into a pink, frilly girl’s dream. I’m not a little girl anymore.”

“Trust me, I noticed,” he murmured, his gaze sliding along my curves before they hit me with their toe-curling intensity. This less restrained side of Danilo startled me, but I appreciated it. I wasn’t sure how to handle it yet. It had come on too suddenly, and I couldn’t help wondering if he was forcing it to make amends for the past.

“Let me show you more of the property.”

I kept my arms wrapped loosely around my middle, and made sure to keep walking an arm’s length away from Danilo, so he wouldn’t try to take my hand. His touch wreaked havoc with my body, and I needed to keep a cool head, to take this slow and really allow Danilo to do what he’d promised.

Danilo led me around the patio to a huge winter garden encased in glass. Upon closer inspection, I realized it was the indoor swimming pool. Danilo opened the door for me. My jaw dropped at the size of the pool. It had Olympic dimensions. Palm trees in huge tubs decorated the corners, giving off a vacation feel.

“I try to work out here at least twice a week. It’s a good addition to the gym,” Danilo said, motioning toward the pool.

I itched to swim a few rounds in the pool but decided to wait for another day. A door at the back of the swim hall led back into the house. Danilo touched my back as he led me down the hallway. “Is this okay?” he murmured, his finger brushing my back to indicate what he meant.

I met his gaze. My first impulse was to say no, but it wouldn’t have been the truth. “I don’t mind.” In fact, I liked the gentle touch and how Danilo tried to make sure I felt comfortable. I regretted provoking him last night in my need to force a reaction out of him. But what was done was done, and we now had to figure out a way to go from here.

Danilo led me into a huge kitchen. “You can cook here whenever you like, but Theodora usually takes care of dinner. I only use the kitchen for breakfast. You’ll meet her and the rest of the staff when you return from your lunch.”

I nodded and followed Danilo back out and down the long corridor toward a living room, adjoining dining room, a library, and cigar lounge as well as a guest bathroom. “Where’s your office?” I asked eventually.

“Upstairs. I prefer the view over the gardens from up there.”

“The gardens are really lovely.” We paused in front of the staircase, Danilo’s palm still on my back.

“When do you need to leave for your date with the women?”

“In about an hour,” I said. “We’re meeting in the hotel restaurant.”

“I can drive you there and have a quick word with your father and brother. I’m sure I’ll find them in the bar with Dante. Will your parents and brother come over for dinner tonight?”

“Can they?” I asked hopefully.

“Of course. I’m sure they’ll be glad to see you again before they have to leave tomorrow.” Danilo moved even closer and cupped my cheek. “I told you I’m going to make it up to you. I’m invested in this marriage.”

His palm was warm and strong against my cheek. The way he sought my closeness like this after years of his distance felt reassuring. Still, I stepped back with a small smile, wanting to be the one to set the boundaries this time.

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SEVENTEEN

Sofia and I entered the hotel lobby together, my hand resting on her hip. She didn't draw back as she'd done in the mansion, instead, she stayed close to my side, probably to keep up appearances in public. Many of our guests from other cities had stayed in the hotel and were mingling in the lobby, either checking out or talking to each other. They all looked our way the moment we stepped inside. The men tilted their heads in a respectful greeting and the women sent curious glances Sofia's way.

I accompanied her to the entrance of the Capital Grille where she'd be meeting the women. The head waiter greeted us politely, motioning toward the back of the restaurant where I spotted Mom, Emma, Valentina, Beatrice, and Anna. Their eyes were glued on us.

I turned to Sofia. "I'll pick you up at two-thirty?" I didn't want to let Sofia out of my sight for too long. I wouldn't have trouble staying busy until then. Pietro, Samuel, and Dante were waiting for me in the wine bar for lunch and a quick business chat.

"All right." She hesitated, then moved closer to me, stood on her tiptoes and pressed a quick kiss to my lips. It was

over too soon and probably for show like every touch in the last few minutes, but my body flared to attention.

Smiling, she turned and headed for the table. My eyes were drawn to her narrow waist and firm ass. Eventually, I tore my gaze away and strolled to the bar.

Dante, Pietro, and Samuel were already seated around a dark-wood table when I entered and sank down on one of the heavy red leather armchairs.

Dante gave me a terse smile. Pietro and Samuel, however, regarded me with a gleam of murder in their eyes.

“A Primitivo for me,” I told the waiter.

“Good choice,” Pietro said. “It’s my favorite red.”

“Mine, too.”

“So, how are things?” Samuel asked, interrupting his father and me.

I waited for the waiter to set down my glass and took a sip before I answered, “Very well, as expected.” If they thought I’d give them more than that, they had another think coming. I didn’t like to share private details with others, especially not when they weren’t as stellar as I’d hoped they would be.

“Sofia’s in the restaurant with the women, I presume?” Dante asked.

“Yes. I dropped her off.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t mind her lunch date,” Samuel said, watching me closely.

I raised my eyebrows. “Sofia can do as she pleases.” Within the boundaries of our world, of course.

“I’d like to discuss Grigory’s foray into illegal street racing,” Dante said with a pointed look at Samuel, who inclined his head and leaned back in his chair.

“It’s not part of our business model, so I prefer him extending his interest in that direction. Maybe they’ll lose focus on weapons and drugs,” Pietro said.

“It might lead to a conflict with the Camorra and the Famiglia, or it could make them work together. I think we

need to keep a close eye on the situation. We can't have the Bratva working with the Camorra."

"I doubt that'll happen," Samuel said. "Remo's good at holding a grudge, and we know he has a grudge against Grigory after he refused to help him."

"Remo's also a businessman. He isn't the madman he likes to play so often," Dante said.

I gritted my teeth. Remo could have been dead. The Camorra wouldn't have been as strong without him. Instead, he paraded around in the west like a king.

Dante regarded me. He knew I still considered his decision to let Remo and Serafina leave a mistake.

"We could sabotage both the Bratva and the Camorra races to stir up a conflict between them," I suggested, instead of my initial urge to demand an attack on Remo fucking Falcone.

Dante thought about that before he nodded. "That could work, but we have to be careful about it. Our cooperation with Senator Clark has extended our reach in the political elite, but these people don't like to be associated with bloody incidents, so we can't risk having any suspicion fall on us."

"We could plant two of our men in either race circuit. They hold qualification races now and then. I'm sure we have a few ambitious young soldiers who would be eager to play racers for a while and cause the occasional accident," Samuel said with a chuckle.

"They have to be unknown faces," Pietro said.

I nodded. "Definitely not from well-known families. We'll have to give them new identities to get through the background checks. I don't doubt Grigory and Remo keeps a close eye on their racers. It's a million-dollar game."

I was glad that Dante hadn't quite lost his bite and wanted to play dirty. I'd been waiting to mess with Remo's business for a while.

We soon lost any sense of time as we discussed possible prospects for the task. When I glanced at my watch and saw that it was almost two-thirty, I pushed to my feet.

The other men gave me curious looks.

“I promised Sofia to pick her up at half past.”

Pietro smiled. “Don’t make your wife wait on your first day. I’ll pay.”

“Will you and your family be joining us for dinner tonight, Dante?”

“No, I’m afraid I have to return to Chicago. I have a meeting with Senator Clark early in the morning.”

I inclined my head and strode away. When I crossed the lobby toward the restaurant, Emma, Anna, and Sofia left the restaurant.

Emma’s face lit up when she saw me. Anna looked less pleased to see me. Sofia had probably shared details of our night with her, which didn’t sit well with me. I’d ignored Marco’s messages asking for details.

I bent and hugged Emma.

“Are you okay?” she whispered.

“Always.”

I straightened and held out my hand for Sofia. She embraced Anna before taking my hand. Anna gave me a tight smile, warnings flashing in her eyes. I ignored her subtle threatening tactics.

“Are you ready to go? With your family coming over for dinner, we should be back in time for you to meet the staff.”

Sofia nodded. She waved at Emma and Anna then followed me. I squeezed her hand, searching her face. “How was lunch?”

“Good. Nobody tried to interrogate me.”

“They probably hoped you’d share tidbits without prompting.”

“There isn’t really much to share,” Sofia mused as she met my gaze.

“Yet,” I murmured. “But I’m willing to change that whenever you’re ready.”

She tilted her head but didn’t say anything. A small part of me regretted that I’d kept my control last night.

The drive passed mostly in silence. Sofia seemed lost in her thoughts, and I wasn’t used to having to work for a woman’s attention like that, even if Sofia was more than worth it. “I want to show you the city tomorrow after breakfast. Indianapolis isn’t a tourist magnet, but there are quite a few things to do.”

Her brow furrowed adorably. “Sure.”

Fuck, I wanted the giddy, infatuated girl back. This cautious version made me feel out of my element. Maybe that was what she wanted. Sofia was clever.

Dinner with Sofia’s family was a pleasant affair as usual. Even Samuel suppressed the lingering hostility between us. After they left and the staff finished their shift, we were once again alone. I gestured at the fireplace. “Would you like me to light a fire? We could have a glass of wine.”

“I’m kind of tired,” she said. “I’d like to go to bed, but if you want to stay up, I don’t mind.”

I got the feeling she’d prefer if I stayed downstairs so she could fall asleep alone, but I wouldn’t allow her to put more distance between us.

“I’ll join you,” I said, setting my hand on her back as we headed upstairs. She didn’t pull away, and I didn’t exactly get the impression that she loathed my touch. Maybe she wanted to hate it, but I doubted she actually did.

I loosened my tie as soon as we entered our bedroom and dropped it on the bench in front of the bed. Sofia eyed me curiously as I began unbuttoning my shirt. I had no intention of hiding in the bathroom whenever I had to change. We were married, and while I wouldn't touch Sofia unless she wanted me to, she'd have to deal with me being in different states of undress in her presence.

Sofia moved toward the window and looked out over the grounds. Then she surprised me by reaching for the zipper at her back and pulling it down. I followed as inch after inch of her smooth skin came into view. She turned around, not looking my way, and casually shrugged out of her dress, letting it pool to the floor as if she undressed in front of me every day.

Despite her played ignorance to my attention, the faint tinge of pink on her cheeks betrayed her. Fuck, I couldn't take my eyes off her in her red lace underwear. Red suited her perfectly. She ran a hand through her hair then slanted a look at me. Her expression was probably meant to be blasé, but I noticed the nerves flickering in her eyes. I had to hold myself back from crossing the room and pulling her against me. Instead, I calmly continued unbuttoning my shirt and shrugged it off before I unbuckled my belt and stepped out of my pants.

Sofia watched me for a moment, then she slipped into the bathroom. I took a deep breath before I followed her. "Do you mind if I get ready as well?"

Sofia had her toothbrush in her mouth and shook her head. I stopped at the sink beside hers and began brushing my teeth. I watched her eyes travel down my body in the mirror. I had trouble not looking at her, especially with the way her nipples puckered under the thin material of her bra. She finished before me, and when I followed her into the bedroom a little later, her back was to me as she pulled her nightgown over her head. She was wearing only those tiny silk panties beneath it. My cock sprang to life. I didn't bother

hiding my arousal as I got into bed beside Sofia. She wanted proof that I desired her and if getting an erection just from watching her in nightwear wasn't enough, I didn't know what might be. I stretched out on my side, facing her. There was an arm's-length between us. Sofia draped the blankets up to her shoulders before she looked at me.

She seemed at a loss for words, and so was I. I hardly knew my wife. I reached out and cupped her face. She didn't pull back, but she didn't move closer to me, either. She simply watched me, as if she was trying to figure me out by merely looking. Most days I hardly understood myself.

"I want to kiss you," I said in a low voice.

Sofia swallowed audibly but leaned forward and gave me a quick peck before she withdrew from my touch and turned on her back.

That wasn't the kiss I'd envisioned, but I'd take whatever closeness Sofia was willing to allow.

She glanced at me. "I need time."

"You'll get all the time you need, Sofia. I'll take what you're willing to give, just never mistake my patience as disinterest again, because if it was up to me, your body would be mine tonight."

She shivered and a pleased smile flitted across her face before I turned off the lights.

"Good night," she whispered.

"Good night."

I listened to her rhythmic breathing. This time she fell asleep without crying.

Maybe I could do this. Maybe I could fix whatever my thoughtless actions had broken.

I woke with Danilo’s body pressed against me. I wondered if he did it on purpose, but I didn’t mind. I kind of liked waking up with his warmth at my back.

Danilo used our second day as a married couple to show me around Indianapolis as promised. He took me on a gondola ride in the city center, and the gondolier even sang for us. Unfortunately, he got many Italian words wrong which led to a few very awkward wordings. I had to stifle laughter at some of his mishaps because I didn’t want to offend him.

Danilo’s mouth twitched, and he leaned closer. “I had hoped this would be romantic. Alas.”

I giggled, then covered my mouth with my hand. Danilo looked pleased as he put his arm around me and pulled me closer until I was resting in the crook of his shoulder. I relaxed against him as the gondolier bulldozed through one Italian love song after the other.

“One day, I’m going to take you to Venice so we can have a romantic boat ride.”

“That would be wonderful,” I gushed, forgetting my new-restrained self for a moment.

Danilo took my hand and kissed my palm, the same gesture he’d used after the party.

After our tour through the city, we had an early dinner at a modern French restaurant in our neighborhood where I enjoyed a delicious bouillabaisse. It was still early in the evening when we returned home.

“I’m going to take a swim. Would you like to join me?” he asked.

I shook my head. I’d promised to call Anna. “I’m going to read a bit.”

He nodded, but I caught the hint of disappointment in his expression.

Once Danilo was gone, I took out my phone and called Anna. She picked up after the second ring. After I told her about our day, she said, “He’s trying, I have to give it to him. He’s probably worried about blue balls.”

I snorted. “I doubt he’s worried that I’ll make him wait forever.”

“Will you?”

I crossed the living room and stepped out on the terrace. “I don’t know. It’s not like I haven’t been thinking about being with him. Before the mess at the party, it was all I could think about.”

“Someone’s horny,” Anna said dryly, making me laugh.

“I just know I’ll get emotionally invested if I allow closeness.”

Anna cleared her throat.

“Even more emotionally invested. I don’t know if I want to risk that yet. Danilo says he desires me, and I believe him, but the thing with the blonde girls still unsettles me.” I sighed. “I don’t know.”

“As long as you’re not sure, don’t do anything. If you want to have sex with him because you feel like it, then do it, but if you’re doubting it, stay away. Buy yourself a Satisfyer or another toy to keep the hormones in check.”

“You are impossible,” I hissed.

“I’d lend you mine but that would be awfully strange and unhygienic.”

“Oh, be quiet!” I laughed.

“What? A girl needs to keep herself entertained!”

“As if you don’t know how to stay entertained.”

Anna laughed. We chatted a couple more minutes before we ended the call, and I went to the swimming hall. Danilo was just drying off. I watched his muscles flex as he ran the towel over them.

Before he could see me, I hurried back to the house.

I was already in bed when Danilo came upstairs and got ready for bed. It was close to midnight, and I wondered what he'd been doing since his swim. He looked tired.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

He startled, as if he'd forgotten about my presence. He perched on the edge of the bed. "I talked to my sister. She had a little freak out and I had to calm her down."

"What happened? Is it because of the wedding?"

Danilo stretched out on the bed in his low-cut boxer-shorts. "The wedding is twelve days away, and I'm worried that giving her hand to Samuel is a mistake."

I put down my book and scooted closer to Danilo. He was glaring up at the ceiling. I touched his bare shoulder. "I know Samuel can be difficult, but he's a good guy. Emma won't have to be worried he'll mistreat her."

"I'm not worried about that," Danilo said in a low, threatening voice. The promise of violence flickered in his eyes.

"Okay," I said slowly.

"Emma's worried I forced Samuel into the marriage and that he doesn't want her."

I bit my lip, remembering the conversation I'd overheard a while ago. "It's the truth, though, isn't it?"

Danilo's head swiveled toward me. "What do you mean?"

"I know about the deal between you and my brother. You marry me if he marries Emma."

Danilo sat up and leaned closer to me. "Did you tell Emma?"

"Of course not. I didn't want her to feel what I felt when I found out."

Danilo sighed. “I tried to give Emma the future she deserves after Cincinnati dropped her as if she was worthless. It had nothing to do with you, Sofia. I would have married you either way.”

“Because I’m a Mione and part of the wider Cavallaro clan.”

Danilo didn’t say anything for a while. “That’s not something you can hold against me. I could hardly have chosen you at the age of eleven because I wanted you. You were a kid in my eyes. I followed the rules.”

“I know.” I sighed. “But the deal between you and Samuel still feels icky.”

Danilo stroked my arm gently, but the touch was enough to make my body take notice. “Do you think I don’t know that? That’s why I didn’t want you or Emma to find out. Our world can be harsh. Sometimes it’s better not to know every detail. But you need to know that I’m glad I married you.”

I swallowed. “Do you want me to talk to Emma? Without mentioning the deal, of course.”

“Maybe it would help.”

“Then I’ll give it a try. I’ll call her in the morning and see if she wants to have lunch.”

“Thank you, Sofia.” He leaned forward and kissed me lightly, but his lips lingered against mine, as if he hoped I might deepen the kiss.

And I wanted to. His scent and warmth fogged up my brain. Instead of giving in to my body’s longing, I nodded and pulled back. This night, for the first time since the party, I dreamed about sleeping with Danilo. As with most of my fantasies, my first time happened in front of a fireplace with flames flickering in the background. I wasn’t sure why I’d chosen this fantasy as my favorite, but it played on repeat.

I met Emma for lunch the next day at Danilo’s parents’ house. Her mother was having brunch with a few friends, so we had privacy. Despite my attempts to convince her that Samuel’s coolness had nothing to do with her and was just

him being his usual idiotic self, I wasn't sure if I got through to Emma. Like Danilo, she was good at hiding her emotions. I could only hope that Samuel wouldn't mess up like Danilo . . . unless he already had. I had no idea of knowing since neither Emma nor he shared anything about their past encounters with me.

In the following days, Danilo seemed more determined to get closer to me, but he also displayed remarkable patience at my keeping my distance. He often touched my lower back when he led me somewhere, took my hand, or gave me one of those lingering kisses that made me want to surrender to him. I enjoyed those small touches and felt myself longing for more with every passing day. Still, I kept my distance.

I grew more relaxed around Danilo and began to find my way around the mansion and Indianapolis. My first meeting with the Captains' wives went surprisingly well, mostly thanks to Danilo's mother Adelina, and my introduction to the heads of the charity for disabled children was a full success. I even got along splendidly with the staff in my new home, though they were still restrained in their interactions with me.

The only thing still dimming my happiness was the distant politeness between Danilo and me. It wasn't the exciting giddiness I'd wished for as a newlywed. This time it wasn't Danilo who was responsible for our restrained encounters. I could tell he wanted more closeness because he was always touching me and leaning in closely to talk to me, but he accepted my boundaries.

I was torn between gratefulness and impatience. My pride kept me from allowing more, as if I needed to keep him waiting for far longer to make up for the years of longing I'd suffered.

Danilo’s cursing caught my attention, so I stepped out of the bathroom of my old bedroom. It was the day of Emma’s and Samuel’s wedding in Minneapolis. Danilo and I had flown in only this morning because of a late-night meeting Danilo had to attend in Indianapolis. We were staying with my parents and it felt strange to be back in my childhood room as a married woman with my husband. Though the room held no sign of childhood, I felt as if I had been catapulted back to my younger self in my old surroundings.

Danilo was tugging at his tie, glowering at his reflection in my vanity. He had to bend slightly to see himself.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s crooked,” he bit out.

Raising my eyebrows, I approached him. The tie looked perfectly fine to me, but Danilo had been in a mood all morning. “Let me,” I said, even though Danilo was better at binding ties. He dropped his arms and straightened.

“Is this because your sister is getting married to my brother?”

Danilo grimaced. “I can’t believe she’s getting married today. I know she’s a grown woman, but to me she’s still the little girl I want to protect.”

I smiled. “That’s why Samuel doesn’t like you very much. You took away his little sister.”

Danilo chuckled, his arms coming around me. “Yeah, he and I have the same protective streak. But I’m not giving you back, either.”

My breath hitched at our new closeness, and my fingers curled around his tie.

Danilo searched my eyes.

Kiss me, I wanted to say but I stayed mute.

Danilo lowered his head slowly, giving me all the time in the world to pull back. His warm breath brushed my lips, and my heart beat so quickly that I was worried it might burst through my ribcage.

Of course, I'd heard girls whispering about kissing. That it could be a magical moment that filled your belly with butterflies. When Danilo's mouth touched mine, it was all that. My body warmed, and a flock of butterflies went on a rampage in my stomach. But that wasn't even half of it. I'd never thought a kiss could make my core clench with desire, could make me so aroused that my panties stuck to my throbbing skin, but Danilo's lips om mine managed that. He massaged my scalp as he tilted my head while his other palm rubbed circles on my back. And his mouth and tongue . . . My mind was spinning as my tongue followed his lead. He kissed me without hurry, a languid, savoring kiss, as our tongues discovered each other.

Danilo pulled back to suck on my lower lip. My breathing grew heavier as our mouths slid over each other, as his tongue teased and stroked in a way that made me want to feel it in other places.

When he finally broke the kiss, I was dazed and panting. My panties were soaked, and I wanted nothing more than to get some relief. Danilo's eyes seemed to have darkened and his chest was heaving. He glanced at his watch and shook his head.

"Damn it. It's time for us to head out. Your family will be waiting for us in church."

How could he be so controlled, how could he not want to rip my clothes off? Part of me was glad, the part that remembered our last encounter and clinging to my pride, but the part my throbbing core led had other plans. Still, I stepped back, nodding. I knew my face was flushed.

Danilo grabbed his jacket from the chair at my vanity. That's when I noticed the bulge in his pants. Triumph shot

through me. He slanted a look at me as if he was trying to see how I was dealing with our kiss.

Gathering my courage, I went over to my suitcase and grabbed a fresh pair of panties. Mine felt sticky and I wouldn't feel comfortable wearing them at the wedding, but under different circumstances I would have hidden that fact from Danilo to spare myself the embarrassment. After seeing his arousal, however, I wanted him to know I wasn't unaffected by the kiss.

Danilo's eyes never left mine.

I flashed him a coy smile. "Just give me a sec to change, okay?"

His gaze flickered over the panties dangling from my fingers and his nostrils flared, his eyes darkening even more. "Go ahead." His voice was little more than a rasp.

Almost high with giddiness, I retreated into the bathroom. I didn't close the door. Reaching beneath my lavender cocktail dress, I tugged down my soaked panties. Danilo hadn't moved from his spot in the center of my room, and it thrilled me that he was watching me.

My body thrummed under his attention. Pretending I didn't notice, I stepped into the fresh panties and shimmied them up my legs.

When I returned to Danilo's side, his arm snaked around my waist. I didn't pull back.

"Sofia," he said, shaking his head again.

"We should head out, right?"

I slid out of his hold and walked away. Soon his steps caught up with me. I could feel his eyes practically burning into me.

The wedding was spectacular, and so were the festivities, which were, of course, held in the best hotel in Minneapolis. Danilo's tension returned when we were seated in the church but slowly abated throughout the evening, though he was still far from relaxed.

The first time he didn't follow his sister's every move with his vigilant eyes was when we danced. He held me close, his palm hot against my lower back. With us being so close, I couldn't stop remembering our kiss—my first real kiss—and man, what a kiss. Even in my fantasies, it hadn't been that good, which made me wonder how the rest of our physical encounters would be. The party debacle obviously wasn't the scale to judge our sex life by.

I caught Anna's eyes briefly from across the room. We hadn't had time for a private chat yet. We'd talked on the phone practically every day since my wedding, but talking in person was different.

"Anna beats my protective streak by far," Danilo murmured.

I laughed, meeting his gaze. "We've been friends all our lives. She just wants to make sure I'm all right."

"And are you? After the kiss?"

Biting my lip, I whispered, "I am." The kiss had awakened my senses and my hopes. If Danilo could kiss me like that, then surely he had to desire me.

"Good, because I can't think about anything else than the taste of your lips, Sofia. I can't wait to kiss you again."

I squeezed his shoulder, pressing a bit closer. "What are you waiting for?" Surprised by my own courage, I laughed.

"If I kissed you the way I want to kiss you right here on the dancefloor that'll cause the scandal of the year," Danilo said dryly.

My gaze drifted over the other guests, engaged in polite conversation and dutiful dances. They'd be shocked, but maybe not. After all, the Mione sisters were prone for scandal. I shoved Serafina out of my head like I had done

every day over the last two weeks. For me to feel comfortable with Danilo and really give us a chance, I couldn't have let thoughts of Fina mess with me, which was also why I hadn't taken her calls. "We shouldn't ruin your sister's wedding like that."

Danilo searched my face, as if he had picked up on my brief meander down memory lane.

"You should probably dance with her," I added. Danilo nodded and reluctantly handed me over to Dad.

After a few more dances, I excused myself from the dance floor, my feet aching in my high heels. I searched the room for Anna, but she was dancing with Samuel. Desperate to get out of my heels, I slipped out of the banquet room. I could hardly take my shoes off around people. It would go against etiquette.

I found a comfortable bench in a side corridor and sank down on it. I released a sigh when I slid my heels off. My feet were red, and blisters were forming at my toes. I shouldn't have worn new shoes for a night of standing and dancing.

Footsteps alerted me that someone was coming, and I looked up to see Danilo rounding the corner, a look of concern on his face. He relaxed visibly when he spotted me.

"Worried I'd run off?" I said with a small smile.

He sat down beside me and surprised me by taking my foot and massaging it. I leaned back and moaned under my breath. "Sorry, this just feels too good."

Danilo shook his head and bestowed the same treatment on my other foot. The look he gave me was intense, and soon the simple massage felt like more than a way to ease my pain.

It was silent in this part of the hotel. The banquet room was a good distance away and the restrooms were in the other direction. Danilo set down my foot and cupped my face. I scooted over to him, and our mouths crashed together.

I lost myself in the kiss, in Danilo's warmth and taste. He hoisted me onto his lap, and I wrapped my arms around his neck, sinking even deeper into the kiss. His erection dug into my ass, stirring up my own need. So much for changing panties.

"Shit," someone muttered.

Danilo and I jerked apart. Anna stood a few steps from us. She sent me a look that made it clear she wanted details, then slowly backed away with a fake sheepish expression. Before she turned the corner, she winked at me.

Danilo made a low sound in his throat. "She's getting annoying."

"You can't blame her. You haven't given her much reason to like you."

"I'm trying to make up for my past transgressions," Danilo said as he kissed my throat.

I closed my eyes, letting his mouth work its magic. "We should return to the party before people get suspicious."

"Let them get suspicious. We're married. We can do whatever we please. What we do in private is our business."

Goosebumps rose on my skin as I considered the options.

I scooted off his lap before I could lose myself completely, but Danilo caught my wrist and pulled me down so he could murmur in my ear. "How are those panties? Soaking wet?"

My eyes widened, surprised by his directness. I wanted to be just as bold. Looking around, I reached under my dress and dragged down my panties. With a coy smile, I stuffed them into his pocket. He froze, and I worried I'd crossed a line, or done something disgusting, then he jerked me against him and kissed me hard. I gasped and pulled away.

"We should get back."

Danilo shoved his hand into the pocket with my panties and groaned. "Sofia, fuck, what are you doing to me?"

I stepped back. The air against my pussy felt strange. The thought of spending the night bare almost made me

regret my little stunt, until I saw Danilo looking at me as if he wanted to devour me.

On our way back to the banquet room, Anna intercepted me. Danilo went ahead as Anna and I made our way to the restroom. The moment we were alone, I blurted, “I’m not wearing panties.” I wasn’t sure what made me say it—perhaps it was the effect of the nervous energy buzzing under my skin since I’d lost the barrier between my throbbing flesh and the air.

Anna’s brown eyebrows shot up. “Good for you!”

I covered my eyes and giggled. “I think I’m losing my mind.”

“All because of a kiss? Or did you two have a quickie in a dark corner before I caught you?” She pulled my hand down, forcing me to meet her curious gaze.

“That was only our second kiss. We haven’t really done more . . . unless you count the party.”

“It doesn’t count,” Anna muttered. “But you two looked awfully cozy, not at all like people who wanted to stop at kissing.”

“I didn’t. I don’t.” I sighed. “I don’t want to rush into things after everything.”

“Then don’t. Or try to separate lust from love. You could start by having great sex with Danilo and then slowly work your way up to an emotional connection.”

“I doubt that’s going to work. I can’t separate sex from emotions.”

“If you say so, but from what I saw I can tell that you won’t be able to resist much longer. Walking around without panties doesn’t really scream abstinence, you know?”

I gave her an indignant look, which turned her grin dirtier. “Come on, Sofia. I’m right, don’t deny it.”

“I wanted to tease Danilo, to make the wait harder for him.”

“Looks like you made him hard.” She winked. “And made it harder for yourself as well.”

“Your wordplays are worse than Leonas’s.”

She bumped her shoulder against mine. “Let’s get you back to your husband. I’m sure he’s been guarding your panties with his life.”

“Anna, don’t say anything to anyone.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry, your good-girl reputation is safe with me. I have practice keeping a white vest. Life’s all about enjoying the little freedoms.”

I huffed as she dragged me back to the party.

Danilo was talking to my dad and Samuel. He looked my way when we entered. Heat washed down my body, amplified by knowing my panties were in his pocket.

“I give it two weeks tops before you rip his clothes off.”

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EIGHTEEN

Anna came dangerously close to being right. Danilo and I kissed often, and it got more difficult to pull back. He never tried to further things, and I figured he was waiting for a sign from me.

Danilo and I fell into a tentative routine. Every morning, we had breakfast together, which Danilo made, of course. Afterward, he left for work meetings, and I took care of my social responsibilities, worked out, met with the chef who was teaching me to cook—I had a talent for desserts, especially patisserie—and worked on my college applications. When Danilo got home late afternoon, we fed the koi together and usually ended up kissing. We then had dinner, which I sometimes cooked, and then settled on the couch to talk or watch movies. Danilo liked the old classics, especially European productions, which was a new experience for me.

The atmosphere always became tense when we get to bed, mostly because I became tense. That was probably why we never kissed in bed.

Two weeks after Samuel's and Emma's wedding, I decided to throw caution to the wind. When Danilo settled

beside me under the covers, I scooted over to him and kissed him.

He didn’t hesitate to wrap his arms around me and pull me against me, deepening the kiss. Our legs became entangled, and Danilo’s hands roamed my back, sliding under my chemise to my naked skin. As always when we kissed, I was soaked. I stroked Danilo’s strong back, following his flexing muscles.

One of Danilo’s hands slid into my panties, squeezing my ass. My body clamped up, uninvited images of the night of the party flooding my head. I tried to push those memories away, forcing myself to focus on the kiss but soon my arousal waned.

Danilo continued to stroke my ass but pulled back, searching my face. “Too much?”

“I don’t know.” I was confused. I wanted more, but my mind had shut my body down.

Danilo pulled his hand out of my panties and cupped the back of my head, narrowing his eyes in thought. “Is this still because of what happened at the party?”

I nodded.

“This time won’t be like that. I’ll take my time, prepare you, pay attention to what you like—”

I leaned in and kissed him again. Running my hands down his chest, I rocked myself against Danilo’s thigh, desperately trying to win over my mind, but by now I wasn’t wet at all. Danilo ran his palm over my outer thigh, then to the sensitive area on the inside. As his fingers came closer to my center, I tensed up. He began to draw back but I put my hand on his, stopping him. “Don’t stop.”

He slid his fingers further up, brushing my outer folds. My body felt ready to splinter with tension and not in a good way. Danilo shook his head and stopped kissing me. “This isn’t working.”

I groaned. “I know.” I flopped onto my back and stared up at the ceiling, trying to determine why exactly I clamped up.

Part of it was me being terrified of the pain, but I doubted it would be like that again. The other part? My brain replaying those blonde chicks Danilo had been with in the past. “Do you prefer blondes?”

“What?” Danilo muttered, bracing himself on his elbow and leaning over me.

I shrugged. “All your dates were blonde, and at the party you chose me because of my wig.”

“Is this because of that?”

“Maybe. I really don’t know.”

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I never had a thing for blondes. Not even years ago.”

I assumed he was referring to when he had been engaged to Fina.

“I dated girls with brown hair, black hair, blonde hair.”

“Not afterwards,” I said, also avoiding Fina’s name.

Danilo touched my hip, his thumb sliding beneath my chemise to stroke my skin. “I didn’t do those women because I felt more attracted to blondes. I did them because of my anger issues.” He reached for my hair and ran his fingers through my curls. “I love the color of your hair, like chestnuts.”

“Okay,” I murmured, even if anger issues seemed a strange explanation for banging blondes, but everyone handled trauma in different ways. I rolled over, curling into him. “I want to keep trying. Eventually, my body will give in.”

Danilo smiled wryly. “I’ll give it as many tries as you want. But maybe we should continue in the morning.” He wrapped his arms around me, and I settled against his chest.

I felt more comfortable with Danilo every day. I still didn’t understand him, but maybe that was normal. Men, especially the men in our world, were a strange species.

I woke up in Danilo’s arms and turned to kiss him. Our bodies were still relaxed from sleep but quickly heated up. But like before, my mind messed things up.

Danilo gave me time to compose myself and went downstairs to prepare breakfast.

Staring at the ceiling, I slipped a hand between my legs. I was dry as the Sahara. It was strange how quickly my body turned from full-blown arousal to a desert-state once it clamped up. I hadn’t stroked myself since the party. For some reason, the events had dulled my libido. My fingers worked my clit the way I usually liked it, but my body barely reacted. Frustrated, I rubbed harder.

Danilo cleared his throat.

I jerked my hand away and closed my eyes with a groan. The bed dipped and I opened my eyes as he set a tray down. “I was just trying to see if my body still worked.”

Danilo leaned down and kissed me slowly. “You looked as if you were in pain. That didn’t look pleasurable.”

“It wasn’t.”

“How about we have breakfast and then we’ll tackle the issue again?”

“Tackle the issue?” I repeated, my brows climbing my forehead. I put a strawberry into my mouth. “That doesn’t sound pleasurable, either.”

We’d finished our waffles and were talking about my plans to start college in spring when Danilo asked, “Will you ever let me read something of yours?”

My cheeks blasted with heat. So far, all my stories had been sappy and sexy love stories.

Danilo raised his eyebrows. “That bad?”

“Just really embarrassing.”

“Worse than how I embarrassed myself by not recognizing my own fiancée only because she wore a wig?”

I snorted. “Maybe.”

Danilo’s phone beeped. He groaned. “I have to call Marco.”

“I’ll grab a shower.” I climbed out of bed, grateful for the reprieve from talking about my writing.

After showering, I cinched my bathrobe around my waist and went back into the bedroom. Danilo was still on the phone, lounging against the headboard, his muscular chest on display.

Seeing my appreciative look, Danilo smirked as he muttered, “What’s so difficult about racing a car?”

I strolled over to the bed and sat down beside Danilo. The bathrobe fell open, revealing my thighs and a hint of my pussy. Danilo’s eyes darted to the slit, lingering on the apex of my thighs. Leaning back, I picked up a strawberry off the tray and pushed it into my mouth.

Danilo ended the call without a word and narrowed his eyes at me. “Seeing you eat strawberries with your pussy on display like that, I can’t stop wondering what you’d taste like.”

I almost choked on the piece of fruit but quickly masked my shock. “Probably not like strawberry,” I said nonchalantly even though my cheeks flamed.

He held out another strawberry. “I bet you do.”

I took the piece of fruit and brought it to my lips, but Danilo shook his head. I frowned in confusion. He nodded toward my most private area.

My eyes widened, but then I said screw it. Cheeks burning, I brought the strawberry to my folds and dipped it between them. Danilo’s eyes followed the movement, his lips parted. Maybe he’d thought I wouldn’t do it.

I pulled the fruit back out, and Danilo gripped my wrist, guiding my hand to his mouth. He cupped the strawberry with his lips, humming.

Arousal pooled between my legs as I watched him eat the fruit.

“As delicious as I thought.”

I caught his lips in a kiss, but only tasted strawberry, not a hint of myself. Danilo pulled me half on top of him. Our kissing soon became heated and he hand cupped my ass, squeezing, fingertips brushing my folds lightly.

My body clamped up, despite the desire flaming up my veins. Danilo pulled away from the kiss when it became clear that I wouldn’t relax. I let my head droop forward until my forehead rested on his warm chest. I hated my body for doing this to me.

It had taken all of my self-control not to take things further, but Sofia’s body had still been tense when I’d stroked her lower back. Her mind was still clinging to the painful past. If I’d pushed her and done what I wanted, fingered her until she came all over my hand, she might have been too tense to enjoy it as she should. I didn’t want to add another bad experience to her memory. If I wanted a fulfilling sex-life, I needed to ensure Sofia only had positive encounters from now on, even if it killed my dick.

“That level of intimacy—” She shook her head. “I can’t . . . not yet. My mind always goes back to that night and

then my body clamps up. It’s frustrating.”

I nodded. I’d suspected that. I had to pay the price for my fuck up.

“Why don’t you try touching yourself while I’m in the room?”

She raised her head from my chest, looking resigned. “I don’t even enjoy it very much when I touch myself, not since that night. You said it yourself, it didn’t look pleasurable. I just can’t relax. And if you watched, I’d be too embarrassed to touch myself. It would feel weird.”

I stroked her throat, my fingers playing over her collarbone. I wanted things to progress. Being patient was hard work. Fuck, I wanted to be with Sofia.

Perhaps . . . “I might have an idea how to get you to enjoy yourself in my presence without me having to touch you until you’re more comfortable.”

Sofia gave me a curious look.

I kissed her. “Just wait. I’ll have to get something first.”

The next evening after we’d gotten ready for bed, I set a pink package on the bed beside Sofia.

“What’s that?” she asked curiously.

I pulled the device out of its packaging. I’d found it online when I’d researched toys for couples. It was a small, curved vibrator with a pad that pressed against the clit.

“It’s a toy recommended for women who have trouble relaxing.” The ad promised every woman an orgasm.

“It looks like a mini pink banana,” Sofia said horrified.

“The penetration is shallow. I thought that’s what you’d prefer until we’ve slept with each other, but the vibration

stimulates your G-spot and the small suction cup will imitate the feel of my lips around your clit."

Sofia studied the device, her face turning increasingly red. "Is that a Satisfyer?"

I raised my eyebrows. "I think that's what it's called, yes."

She shook her head and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like Anna. I didn't ask why the girls had discussed sex toys.

I held up the remote control. "And this is for me so I can control the vibration of both ends."

Sofia's cheeks became scarlet. "Oh god."

"I think this might help you relax and get off. It's worth a try, don't you think?" The mere idea of controlling the dildo in Sofia's pussy tightened my groin. I wanted to give her as much pleasure as possible, and if she couldn't relax under my touch or her own touch, we needed to figure out new ways.

"Will you try it?" I murmured as I kissed her.

She nodded, but still looked vaguely horrified. I handed her the vibrator and a small bottle of lube. She stared at it, then pushed to her feet and hurried to the bathroom. I'd hoped she'd slide it into her pussy with me present, but I'd give her all the time she needed. I'd chosen the smallest vibrator I could find, unsure about Sofia's level of comfort with penetration. She'd felt very tight at the party, but that had been mostly my fault.

After a couple of minutes, I called, "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she called out. The door opened, and she stepped out. She was walking stiffly, and blood rushed to my cock when I realized it was because of the dildo in her pussy. With her nightgown covering her, I couldn't see anything, but just imagining the device was enough to drive me insane.

She took a seat next to me, biting her lip.

"And?"

“It feels strange, but not in a bad way. A bit uncomfortable at first, but it’s getting better.”

I took the remote control and turned the clit stimulator on low. Sofia sucked in a sharp breath, her thighs twitching. “How do you like it?”

“It’s nice,” she breathed out, looking down into her lap.

I turned the vibrator on low as well, and the soft buzzing started. Fuck, if this wasn’t the sexiest thing I could imagine.

“Oh,” she whispered, pressing her thighs together. Her eyelids drooped as the device pleasured her.

My boxers became uncomfortably tight. I might come in my clothes like a teenager. A brief smile flickered across Sofia’s face when she saw my predicament, so I turned the clit stimulator higher, making her gasp.

I wanted nothing more than to take out my cock and tell Sofia to suck me off. She surprised me when she reached out and cupped me through my boxers. My cock twitched eagerly. “Sofia,” I groaned. “I’ll have to take my cock out and jack off if you don’t want to take care of it.”

It wasn’t a romantic thing to say, but screw it, I hadn’t been with a woman in more than six months. I was ready to explode.

A coy smile formed on Sofia’s lips. I turned her vibrator on medium.

Her hold on my cock tightened. “Show me,” she whispered.

I didn’t need to be told twice. I shoved my boxers down and curled my free hand around my cock, stroking myself and spreading my pre-cum over my tip. Sofia watched me almost eagerly.

Lust flared in Sofia’s gorgeous eyes as she reached for me. I pulled my hand back, allowing her to touch me. She started to rub me carefully, but soon her ministrations became more eager. Her eyelids drooped and her breathing became heavier. I upped the clit suction. Sofia’s head fell back, her mouth falling open, her thighs clamping together.

It took all of my self-control not to shoot my load right away, just knowing Sofia had a vibrator in her pussy and enjoyed it. I turned the vibration even higher, needing to see her get off. Sofia's lips parted in a loud moan, her eyes fluttering shut. My fingers tightened on the remote. Desperate for her to come, I pushed the clit stimulator on high as well.

Sofia squeezed my cock hard in her fist, her eyes flying open, her thighs clenching together. She cried out hoarsely as she came. I couldn't hold back anymore. With a shudder, I released all over her hand. She shook under the force of her own orgasm, milking me almost painfully, but I relished the thrilling pain.

"Too much," she gasped, loosening her hold on my cock.

I lowered the stimulation to low. Sofia fell back on the bed, looking stunned and spent. I stretched out beside her, careful not to get cum on the covers. Bending over her face, I ran my thumb across her plump lower lip. It was red. She must have bitten down on it during her release. "You drive me completely crazy, Sofia."

She grinned, then bit her lip and covered her face with her hands. A giggle burst from her lips. "I can't believe we just did that."

I tugged her hands down, amused by her mortification. "Don't be embarrassed. Seeing you let loose was sexy."

She cleared her throat. "I should remove the . . . toy," she said and got up to disappear in the bathroom. I used the time to clean myself with a tissue. I needed to shower. I followed Sofia, who stood at the sink, washing the vibrator.

"I'm going to shower. Do you want to join me?"

Sofia pursed her lips, then shook her head. "Go ahead. I'll lie down."

I walked up to her and touched her hips, meeting her gaze in the mirror. "Are you okay?"

She smiled. "I am. I just need to process." She put her hand over mine. "Don't worry."

I nodded and watched as she walked back to the bedroom. When I was done, Sofia was sitting up in bed, reading something in a notebook.

I slipped under the covers and wrapped an arm around her. She held out the notebook for me.

I raised an eyebrow.

“It’s something I wrote. It’s embarrassing, but I want to share it with you.”

I began to read what I discovered was Sofia’s fantasy for our first sexual encounter. Surprise washed over me as I read her story, especially how she saw me—her ideal version of me. She didn’t go into every detail, but she didn’t shy back from describing how I touched her and made love to her. That’s how she put it, and it was probably what she longed for. Lovemaking was something I’d always wondered about but never experienced. I cared deeply about Sofia and couldn’t deny that I was falling for her. Her smiles and kindness and her stubborn streak that came through occasionally, but love wasn’t something that happened in the course of a few weeks. It took time. That was something I believed firmly.

When I was finished reading, I looked up. Trepidation shone in Sofia’s eyes as if she feared my reaction. “That’s how you want our first time to be? In front of a fireplace on the floor?”

She flushed. “It’s how I imagined it. It’s not supposed to be instructions for you.” She closed her eyes, turning even redder though I hadn’t thought it possible. “I just wanted you to know that I’ve been imagining our first time, and that even if my body is being difficult, I eventually want to be with you.”

I set the notebook aside and pulled her against me. “There’s a beautiful fireplace in the living area of my lodge with a view over the lake.” I fell silent. Bringing up the lodge probably wasn’t the best idea, but Sofia only smiled. “We’d

have to wait for the temperature to drop for a fire to make sense.”

I had no intention of waiting until fall to sleep with my gorgeous wife. The five weeks since our wedding had already proved impossibly difficult.

Sofia must have read my thoughts because she rolled her eyes. “I don’t want to wait that long, either.”

“Good. I don’t mind dying of heatstroke in front of a roaring fire in summer if it means I get to claim your beautiful body.”

Sofia pressed her face into my neck and chuckled, but she didn’t say a word about when she’d be ready. I’d just have to practice some more patience.

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NINETEEN

In addition to aerobics in the local Outfit gym where I'd met Marco's wife Bria by chance and hit it off, I started yoga on her recommendation. Before our accidental meeting, I'd only seen her at the wedding. For some reason, we'd never had a double date. Danilo always met Marco alone, mostly to deal with business.

It was a beautiful, mild July morning when I rolled out my yoga mat beside the Koi pond. In the six weeks since I'd moved into the mansion, I'd started to feel more and more at home. I still talked to my mother every other day, but I didn't feel homesick for Minneapolis anymore. Now that I had a friend in Bria, things were looking up on that front as well. The distance between Anna and me made regular meetings difficult, even if we texted daily.

I was in the downward-dog position when I spotted Danilo coming down the path in his usual dark suit.

He watched me as I moved out of downward-dog into cobra. It was only the second time that I'd done yoga in our garden next to the Koi pond, but I knew it would remain my favorite spot for as long as the weather allowed it. I loved watching the fish occasionally peek out of the surface as if

they were checking on me. I didn’t even feel self-conscious as Danilo watched me. Yoga helped me forget all my troubles and lingering insecurities. I’d even considered finally calling Fina. She hadn’t tried to call me in two weeks, giving up after I never picked up. Now that my relationship with Danilo grew every day, I felt guilty for refusing to talk to her.

I sank down on my ass, my legs crossed. “Hey.”

He strolled over to me. Despite the early morning hour, he was already impeccably dressed, ready to start work early. I admired his work ethic, even if it meant we didn’t have as much time together as I might have liked sometimes. But Indianapolis was an important city, and Danilo was still a young Underboss in the Outfit. He needed to show he was a hard worker so his men and especially the Captains and other Underbosses respected him. Making bloody statements had its limits after all. They mostly only brought you fear, not admiration.

“I want to spend a few days in our lake lodge. It would be good to have time for each other without any distractions, like a mini-vacation.”

Surprised, I pushed to my feet and wiped my face with a towel. “That sounds great.” Remembering Danilo’s comment about the fireplace in the lodge, my belly filled with butterflies.

Danilo stepped close to me and cupped my face. “Just you and me, nothing else.”

I nodded against his mouth and sank into the kiss. His tongue parted my lips, eagerly tasting me. I loved kissing Danilo. It always awakened every nerve in my body. Since he’d gifted me the sex toy—something I hadn’t mentioned to Anna yet—I’d relaxed more and more, and I came every time we used it. While I loved it, I wanted to be physical with Danilo without the help of a device. Maybe the lodge would give us the opportunity.

“Aren’t you too busy?” I whispered when he pulled back.

Danilo hated leaving Indianapolis even for a day. Being the Underboss of one of the most important cities of the Outfit came with many responsibilities, and he took his responsibilities very seriously. That he'd leave his city for several days to spend time with me showed me that he really wanted our marriage to work.

"Our marriage is more important. We could use some time to enjoy each other's company."

A pleasant shiver mixed with nerves in my body. Would we finally have sex? I wasn't as worried about the prospect as I used to be. In the last few days, Danilo had made sure to give me plenty of pleasure to make up for our botched-up first encounter, and I was certain he'd keep doing so.

"I can't wait," I murmured, hoping he understood what I meant.

He pulled me even tighter against him and kissed me until my clothes felt uncomfortably warm and my body pulsed with need.

"I need to get to a meeting with Marco," Danilo murmured regretfully.

"I met his wife in the gym twice now. We really like each other. I thought we could have dinner together some time?"

Danilo looked surprised. "Marco didn't mention anything."

I shrugged. "Maybe Bria didn't tell him."

The look on his face told me that didn't surprise him. I hadn't talked to Bria about her marriage with Marco, so I wasn't sure if they had problems. The only thing I knew was that they'd gotten married a few weeks before us.

"I'll talk to Marco about it, but we'll have our vacation first." He kissed me again before he turned around. I watched him walk away and let out a small sigh, trying to ignore the pulsating need in my body.

I was more than ready to try again, and I knew this time would be perfect.

A week later, we finally made time for our getaway. It was the first time we'd returned to the Mancini lake lodge after Danilo's birthday party. In the daylight, I could fully appreciate the beautiful landscape surrounding the lodge and the lake.

I peered curiously out of the window. A small flicker of nerves kindled in my belly as we drove up the driveway. I didn't want to link this place with my bad memories. After all, a place couldn't really harbor bad feelings, and I didn't want to be shackled to the past.

Danilo put a hand on my knee and squeezed. "Are you all right?"

I glanced over to him and curled my fingers around his. "Yeah, just enjoying the landscape."

"I hope you can enjoy the trip. I know your only experience here was horrible, but I really love spending time at the lodge, and I hope you will eventually as well."

"Don't worry. I'll just focus on the here and now."

Danilo pulled up in front of the lodge, a two-story timber building with a large patio overlooking the tree-lined lake.

I got out and breathed in the fresh forest air. The late July heat dominating Indianapolis wasn't present here. It was warm and humid, but not hot. Perhaps we could really light a fire in the fireplace.

Danilo grabbed our luggage from the trunk and carried it into the lodge. Now, without dozens of guests and flashing lights, the cozy vibe the inside of the house gave off surprised me. Everything was timber, sheep skin, cow hide rugs, and soft, cognac-colored leather sofas. Huge windows allowed the sun to penetrate the big rooms with their high ceilings. A magnificent stone fireplace dominated the center

of the living area as was standard in most lodges in the area. Danilo set down the luggage in the lobby and showed me around. When we stepped out onto the patio, I had a brief flashback, remembering how I'd first spotted Danilo on the lower deck and how we'd danced together. Goosebumps sprang up on my skin, but the onslaught of memories didn't come.

Danilo touched my hip, his eyes searching mine. "Are you sure you're fine?"

"Definitely," I said. "How about you show me the rest of the lodge?"

Danilo led me to a jacuzzi off to the side of the patio that overlooked the lake and the surrounding forest. I hadn't noticed the sauna off to the side of the patio the last time.

It took my breath away.

I remembered briefly seeing the jacuzzi at the party, crowded with half-naked, drunk people. Suddenly curious, I narrowed my eyes at Danilo. "How often did you have parties like that?"

Danilo chuckled. "To be honest, I wouldn't even have organized that party at all if it weren't for Marco. He was determined to have a last hurrah for us before we got married."

I huffed. "A last hurrah it was."

Danilo stroked my hip, tugging me against him. "One of my least favorite birthday memories, if I'm being honest. I hope we can create many more far better memories in the future."

"We will," I said.

Danilo had been attentive and loving these last few weeks. He'd really been trying as much as I had. Finally, I wasn't the only one who seemed invested in our relationship. Apart from that, the way Danilo looked at me often made me think he might have feelings for me. I doubted those feelings were love. I didn't want to lose

myself in foolish hope again, but there was definitely something there.

“Why don’t we have a spa evening?” Danilo suggested. “We’ll soak in the hot tub for a bit, then go into the sauna. We can cool off in the lake.”

The temperatures in this part of the state were still moderately warm, but it usually cooled down in the evening. An evening in the hot tub and sauna sounded amazing.

I smiled. “Sounds wonderful.”

“Let’s unpack and drive to the grocer to grab food for the next few days. There’s still game in the freezer from my last couple of hunting trips with Marco, so we should have enough meat for our trip. But we can’t defrost it until tonight.”

“We could cook something together. Maybe involtini or saltimbocca?”

Danilo nodded. “Let’s see what the small grocer has. They mostly have game and fresh fish.”

“We’ll make it work.”

After unpacking, which took far longer than usual because I was stunned by the breathtaking view through the panorama windows over the lake in our bedroom, we finally set out for the grocer.

After a quick dinner of grilled fish and corn followed by grilled watermelon, something I’d never considered a possibility but was incredibly delicious, we went up to the bedroom to undress.

Danilo followed my every move as I stripped and stood before him completely naked. He was naked as well, and I admired his body. My lips twitched into a smile as I watched his cock grow. His returning smile was dark and hungry. He reached for something I hadn’t noticed on the nightstand before—my small bullet vibrator. It was another toy Danilo had bought for me, one that could be inserted fully without any clit stimulation.

“I brought this with me. It’s been quite useful so far.”

I bit my lip. “Good thing it’s waterproof, I guess.”

Danilo slowly approached me, the small device in his hand and a look on his face that made my core contract deliciously. “May I?”

I nodded, becoming even more aroused by the idea of Danilo doing this. So far, I had always inserted it. Danilo stroked the outside of my leg.

“Raise one of your legs on the bed,” he instructed.

I did, trying to look elegant, despite my exposed state. Danilo’s fingers brushed my sensitive folds as he slowly inserted the vibrator, never taking his eyes off me. My lips fell open as he pushed it deeper and deeper. Our eyes met, and he seemed ready to devour me. He dropped his hand, but I wanted nothing more than for him to keep touching me there.

“How does it feel?”

“Good,” I rasped out as I lowered my leg.

He reached for the remote control on his nightstand. My nipples puckered at once, anticipating what was to come.

Danilo turned the vibrator to the lowest vibration level, only a whisper of pleasure but at the same time the promise of more. “Ready to soak in the jacuzzi?”

I pushed up on my tiptoes and kissed him before murmuring, “So ready.”

Danilo let out a low groan and took my hand, tugging me along. The first few steps sent shockwaves of pleasure through my core as my body adapted to the vibration deep within.

Danilo looked at me from the corner of his eye, knowing full well that I was oversensitive right now, but he didn’t slow. Not that I was any less eager about spending a relaxing and hopefully pleasurable evening in the hot tub and lake.

Danilo clutched my hand firmly as he led me to the jacuzzi. Even that innocent touch felt like so much more just because of the device inside of me. I felt naughty and

daring and incredibly sexy knowing that it turned Danilo on. The temperature outside had cooled considerably, and the light breeze caressed my skin in the most tantalizing way.

Danilo helped me up on the steps to the jacuzzi. As I lowered myself into the hot water, a soft moan escaped me. My muscles relaxed as I sank back against the backrest, savoring the sensations inside of me.

Danilo was sporting an impressive erection by now. I grinned, knowing it turned him on to control the little device steering my pleasure.

He put his arm around my shoulders, his fingers stroking my upper arm. I rested my head against his strong arm and gazed out over the lake. It was such a peaceful sight, so very unlike my first impression of the area on Danilo's birthday.

"What are you thinking?" Danilo asked carefully, as if he could sense that my thoughts had drifted back in time.

I brushed my palm over his chest. "Just enjoying the beautiful view."

I raised my head and captured his lips for a sensual kiss. I pressed even closer to him, sliding onto his lap. His erection brushed against my thigh. Danilo shifted me until I straddled him, his length pressing up against my belly and rubbing deliciously against my most sensitive spot. I wrapped my arms around Danilo's neck, trying to mold our bodies together. I moaned into his mouth when his cock put the perfect amount of pressure on my clit. Danilo's palm slid down my back slowly before he cupped my ass and squeezed. Another moan slipped out. "I can't wait to be inside of you," he growled.

Despite the brief flash of nerves, I wanted that, too. Danilo's eyes met mine, trying to gauge my reaction. I held his gaze. "I'd like that."

Danilo brushed his lips across my cheek and ear. "Tomorrow. We had a long drive today, and I want to make tomorrow really special."

We spent the next hour making out in the jacuzzi until I began to rock myself almost frantically against Danilo and he released a low groan. He stopped me with an almost painful look. “I have to stop you there or I’ll embarrass myself.”

I couldn’t help but giggle, reveling in the power I possessed.

Danilo lifted me to my feet with a growl and stood. “Enough.” But he squeezed my ass playfully and helped me out of the jacuzzi. “Maybe I need to give you a taste of your own medicine.”

He bent down and picked up the remote control he’d dropped on one of the lounge chairs. I bit my lip. He upped the vibrations, causing me to lean into him with a sharp exhale. Danilo kneaded my ass cheek again. We stepped into the Finnish sauna. Heat blasted my body. Too many sensations overwhelmed me. The vibration, the heat, Danilo’s hand on my ass. We settled on the wooden benches in the sauna. Danilo put a spoonful of water on the coals, and the scent of fir filled my nose.

My eyes took in his erection that strained to attention.

Danilo noticed my gaze and leaned closer to whisper, “You’re doing this to me, Sofia.”

I brushed my finger down his abs and curled my hand around his cock, massaging him the way he liked.

He reached for the remote control and upped the vibrations again. My fingers jerked against Danilo’s length. I could feel myself getting closer and wondered if I could come without any friction to my clit. Danilo gently pushed my hand away. “Not yet,” he said roughly. He stood and helped me to my feet. I felt shaky on my legs, trembling from the small bolts of pleasure that radiated through me.

“Let’s cool off a bit.”

Danilo led me down to the lower deck. I slowly lowered myself into the cold lake. I gasped, then relished the sensation because it cleared the lust-filled haze from my

head. Danilo winked at me and dived in headfirst, sprinkling me with ice-cold water. He burst through the surface a moment later.

Grinning, he swam over to me and dragged me against him. I twined my legs around him and kissed him again. He moved us over to the shore so he could stand and keep us both above the water. Danilo rubbed my back, then moved lower to squeeze my ass. “Danilo,” I whispered. I wasn’t sure how to voice my need.

“Soon,” Danilo promised.

Soon sounded too far away. I needed relief now, but I allowed myself to sink into the kiss, to savor the moment.

I began to tremble in the cold water despite Danilo’s ministrations. “Time to warm up,” he murmured, dragging his mouth away from mine. Linking our fingers, he led me back to the soft-pebbled shore and up a narrow path onto the patio. The boards were warm from the fire. I curled my toes in delight, feeling the warmth return to them.

Danilo grabbed one of the plush towels he’d put on a chair and wrapped it around my shoulders before he turned the bullet vibrator off. I gave him an indignant look, but he only smiled, a dark promise of what was to come. He began to dry me with soothing, gentle rubs. My arms, my back, then even gentler over my breasts. My nipples became even harder and not because of the cold. He took his time with my breasts, brushing the soft fabric over my aching nubs in tantalizing circles until small pants escaped my parted lips. This felt so good, and slowly a deep, aching need spread between my thighs.

His eyes followed the movements of his hands as they traveled to my belly. He dried my ass, squeezing gently now and then. I bit my lip when he got down on his knee to dry my thighs, leaving him eye-level with my pussy. I could feel how achingly wet I was and knew Danilo would be able to see it. He lifted my leg to dry it off and propped my foot up on his knee. His gentle rubbing increased the throbbing

between my legs, and the cool air hitting my wet flesh only heightened the sensation. Danilo's eyes lingered on my pussy as he rubbed my thighs, and I clenched involuntarily under his attention. At last, he touched the towel to my aching flesh, gently stroking me dry.

My breathing became heavy, but too soon Danilo was done and dropping the towel. He didn't get up. Instead, he leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to my pussy. My breath hitched and my hands shot out to grab his head. His warm breath ghosted over my flesh before he pressed a firmer, lingering kiss against my folds, his lips grazing my clit. I released a soft whine. I hadn't even realized how much I longed for this.

"What do you want, Sofia?" he murmured between kisses, making it difficult to form a thought. So far, I'd tried to keep some distance between us by not allowing this kind of closeness. The little device still inside of me allowed me pleasure without too much physical contact, a strange possibility.

I wanted to let loose, to succumb to Danilo's touch, wanted to really bring our bodies together, even at the risk of opening up my emotions again.

"Sofia," he groaned. "I'm going crazy down here. Let me taste you." The flames barely penetrated the surrounding dark and distorted Danilo's face. I knew it would do the same with mine, protecting me from his penetrating stare.

Instead of replying, I shifted my leg to the side, allowing him access. He gently tugged at the cord of my bullet vibrator, making me moan before he pulled it out slowly and put it down on the towel beside us. Then he didn't hesitate. His tongue dived in, tasting me, parting my folds to explore my sensitive flesh. I clung to his head, closing my eyes as I practically rode his mouth. I felt wanton, almost depraved, like I could let loose in the safety of the dark, could be someone else. With every trace of his hot tongue over my slit, more of my control slipped away. Every inch of my body

seemed to pulsate with need. His tongue stroked and teased until he began licking my clit with slow, precise movements that had me moaning loudly.

I glanced down, needing to see what he was doing. In the flickering light, I could see that his eyes were closed, a confident smile tugging at his lips, which were pressed up to my pussy. His tongue darted out, lapping at me, and I couldn't hold back. I came with a harsh cry that echoed over the lake, pressing myself against Danilo's mouth, wanting his tongue deep inside of me. It was a strange thought, but I couldn't shake it. His fingers dug into my ass, shoving me even closer. As if he could read my darkest desires, he buried his tongue deeply in me. I kept watching, unable to rip my eyes away from the sight of Danilo pleasuring me.

I almost sobbed with pleasure, still clinging to his head, not wanting this to end even when it became too much. Danilo pulled back and pressed a kiss to my folds before he moved up my body and claimed my mouth for a kiss. I reached for his erection, but he gently grabbed my wrist.

"I want to come inside of you. Tomorrow." He looked deeply into my eyes, waiting for me to say something.

I kissed him, whispering, "I want that, too."

We settled on the lounge furniture, Danilo's arms wrapped around me from behind. The flames kept us in a warm cocoon and Danilo's body shielded me from the wind. The trees rustled in the breeze and the waves lapped at the shore. It was so peaceful.

"What happened to your sister?" I asked softly, stroking Danilo's arm.

He didn't react, as if he hadn't heard me, and I wondered if he chose to not answer me. I didn't want to push him, but I hated basing my opinion on the rumors and gossip that was floating around in our circles. And asking Emma seemed like a breach of Danilo's trust, as if I was passing him by. Not to mention that I wanted to know about the man at my side. That part of Danilo's past played such a crucial

role in his life that not knowing seemed like a disadvantage if I wanted to get to know him fully.

“She was in a car accident,” he murmured, his voice heavy with guilt and wistfulness.

I’d heard different stories about how badly the car had crashed. Some rumors speculated that Danilo had been the driver and that it had been swiped under the rug. Given his obvious feelings of guilt, I wondered if the rumors had some truth to them.

“Emma had a ballet show one evening. My father was in hospital because of his cancer and Mother spent the evening with him. He was just recovering from surgery. I went to see Emma’s show but shortly before it was over, I got a call from one of our men that there had been a bloody conflict with the Bratva.” Danilo glowered into the flames as he replayed the day. I angled my body so I could see him better.

“Father couldn’t handle it because of his sickness, so I had to deal with the matter. I chose to leave the show early and let Emma’s bodyguard drive her home so I could head out to the bar that had been attacked. An hour later, Marco called me to tell me Emma had been in a brutal crash.”

His voice carried so much pain and regret that my own heart felt heavy.

“I drove to the hospital, the same hospital where my father was recovering. She was still in surgery when I arrived. When the doctor told me that her spine was crushed and that the chances of her ever walking again were close to zero, I thought the rug was being pulled from under my feet. And then I had to tell my parents, because nobody had informed them about the crash yet.”

He paused, the pain of the memory palpable. I linked our fingers, wishing I could have been there for him that day.

“When I entered my father’s hospital room and saw him and mother both already at the edge of what they could take, I considered lying to them, but they deserved to know

the truth. My mother broke down crying, and my father tried to get up from the bed, even though his surgery had only been the day before. They didn't blame me, which for some reason only made me feel worse."

"But you didn't drive the car. It was the bodyguard's job to protect Emma and take her home safely. You couldn't have known that he'd crash. You tried to fulfill your duty to the Outfit like your father probably expected from you. You didn't do anything wrong."

Danilo's smile was grim. "I still feel like it was my job to keep my sister safe. She loved ballet so much, and she was really talented, and then in one moment, it was taken from her without any fault of her own. All because the bastard of a bodyguard felt provoked by another driver and chose to participate in a street race. The asshole had drunk alcohol."

"What happened to him?"

For a second, harsh brutality reflected in his eyes and I knew the answer. "He got the death he deserved, begging for mercy but being denied just like Emma's denied a normal life."

I squeezed his hand. "Emma is such a positive person. She's strong. She's taking it with so much grace. I doubt she blames you."

"She doesn't. She's told me that repeatedly, but like you, she's too kind for this world, Sofia."

I pursed my lips. "Being kind doesn't mean being blind to the truth. You weren't guilty. End of the story."

"You don't seem to leave me any choice but to take your word for fact," he said with barely hidden amusement.

I braced myself on his chest, trying to look stern. "That's right. I'm putting my foot down."

He shook his head, chuckling. "I guess then I have no choice but to listen to you."

I leaned forward and kissed him.

"Do you miss her?" he asked carefully.

He didn’t have to say her name for me to know he was talking about Serafina. I was taken aback by him bringing my sister up. So far, he’d avoided her like the devil avoided holy water.

“Yeah, sometimes. Especially at Christmas or birthdays, but sometimes just in ordinary situations, but it’s okay. She’s got her life, and I’ve got mine.”

I waited for his anger, because it usually came quickly when Las Vegas was mentioned, even just in passing. I considered telling him the truth, that I’d talked to Fina on the phone a few times, but then chose not to do it. He’d take it as betrayal, which was another reason why I wasn’t sure if I could talk to my sister again. “What about you?”

His brows furrowed. “Why would I miss her? I never spent time with her. I have you, and I don’t want anyone else.”

I leaned against him, soaking up his words eagerly. They were said without hesitation.

Goosebumps pricked my skin from the cool breeze. Danilo stroked my arm. “Should we go in? You’re cold.”

“No,” I said quickly. “Let’s stay for a little while. It’s too beautiful.”

Danilo nodded, peering down to me. “You’re absolutely right.”

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TWENTY

The sky was cloudy, and dark gray clouds pressed closer on the horizon. After a lazy breakfast in bed, Danilo and I headed out for a walk through the forest before the sound of thunder drove us back to the lodge.

The second we were inside, the sky opened and heavy rain fell.

“Perfect fireplace weather,” Danilo said, kissing my neck possessively before he headed into the living room. I smiled as I watched him stack logs of dried wood into the fireplace. I changed out of my hiking clothes into a more comfortable wool sweater and a skirt before I went back downstairs

“I’ll grab a few snacks for a picnic on the floor,” I said in passing and headed to the kitchen. I returned fifteen minutes later with a tray of champagne, assorted berries, Belgian chocolate truffles and French cheese. The fire blazed in the fireplace and Danilo had gathered the sheepskin rugs around the chimney.

My stomach somersaulted as I walked toward him, my hunger from earlier forgotten. I set the tray down on the floor and smiled at my husband. He took my hands and kissed my palms. We sank to the ground, my back against

Danilo's front, his legs to either sides of me and snacked on cheese and fruit. Eventually, Danilo opened the champagne and we sipped at it.

Danilo kissed my throat, then gently pushed down the neckline of my sweater, revealing my bare shoulder. His lips brushed over my skin. "You are impossibly beautiful, Sofia. Every inch of you."

"Really?" I whispered. Danilo had called me beautiful before, but after the years of self-doubt I couldn't hear it often enough.

Danilo met my gaze with determination. "Really. I'll have to tell you more often." He kissed the top of my arm. The logs crackled as the flames ate away at them and soon warmth cocooned us. Rain lashed almost angrily against the French doors and the lake seemed pitch black, but from the inside, well protected and warm, the sight was mesmerizing.

His hands found their way under my sweater, fingertips swiping over my naked belly. My skin constricted under the gentle touch. Danilo slowly pushed my sweater up over my head. I wore only a skimpy lace bra beneath. "Let me admire you, Sofia." He pushed gently until I reclined on the cushions he'd spread all around the sheepskins. I forced myself to lie still, my arms stretched out leisurely above my head.

For so long I'd felt inadequate, but looking at Danilo now as he drank in my body, I didn't doubt his desire for me.

Danilo shook his head. "I wish you could see yourself through my eyes only once, then you'd never doubt my desire for you again."

I stifled a smile as he voiced part of my thoughts.

Danilo bowed low over me and kissed me. I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck, glad to have his body shielding me. He stroked my side, the touch careful and loving. His lips met mine again, and soon his kiss became hungrier, more demanding, and my body sprang to life at the feel of him on top of me, from his kiss and his warm

palm against my side. He pulled out of our kiss and locked gazes with me. “I want you, Sofia.”

My heart lurched because his eyes proved his words right. He desired me physically, and beyond that, also emotionally. I could feel it, and this realization settled like a balm over all the wounds from the past. I smiled and wrapped my arms around his neck. “I’m ready. Just be careful.”

Danilo’s eyes flashed with guilt and softened. He stroked along my throat until his fingers tangled in my hair. The gentle touch made me shudder and goosebumps covered my skin. “Trust me, I’ll take all the time you need.”

I nodded. I trusted him. His kisses were gentle. His hands trailed down my body, discovering every inch of my arms and sides almost reverently, calming me with every stroke. His innocent touch didn’t leave me unaffected. Despite the innocent nature of his strokes, my core soon heated with a deeper need, a need for more.

Danilo’s mouth slid over mine leisurely before moving lower. He trailed soft kisses on my chin and throat before his lips graced the swell of my breasts. My nipples hardened immediately, straining against the thin material of my bra. Danilo released a low hum then traced the edge of my neckline with the tip of his tongue. My nipples ached for attention, almost painfully erect, and a pulsating feeling took hold of my center. I needed more. I’d waited so long for Danilo’s touch, for his desire and attention, and now that I had it, it was like an aphrodisiac, a drug I couldn’t get enough of.

“So beautiful,” Danilo murmured as he placed a light kiss on my nipple through the fabric. I sucked in my breath, my hand flying to the back of his head.

“Danilo.” The needy note in my voice didn’t leave any doubt as to what I needed. Danilo stroked his palms down my sides and slipped them under my back, opening my bra. I helped him by briefly sitting up so he could remove my

bra, but then I reclined back on the plush carpet to allow Danilo a view of me. His hungry eyes took in my naked breasts and my insides somersaulted at the obvious desire he felt for me. It wasn't the first time he was seeing my breasts but every time he did, he looked as if it were the very first time. The bulge in his pants was unmistakable now.

Danilo shook his head as if he needed to get out of a trance. He hovered over me and brushed his thumb across my nipple. I bit my lip at the tingling sensation spreading from my chest all the way to the sweet spot between my legs. My panties stuck to me. He rubbed my nipple slowly, all the while watching me. Despite the heat in my cheeks, I kept my gaze on him. His eyes locked on mine, and with a dangerous smile curling his gorgeous mouth, he bent over my breast and darted his tongue out, the tip nudging my nipple. My lips parted. Finally, his mouth closed around my nipple and he sucked it into his mouth. Pleasure radiated through every inch of my body as he sucked and kneaded at the same time with his other hand. His teeth closed around my nipples, startling me. He tugged lightly, then harder. I dug my nails into the rug at the hot need pulsating between my legs with every tug of his teeth. He released my tender nipple and circled it soothingly with his tongue before drawing it into his mouth to suckle gently on it. I mewled. My panties were completely drenched, so when Danilo's hand slipped down my body, I tensed in embarrassment.

"Relax," he rasped against my nipple. Then his words turned into a low growl as his fingers stroked over my soaked panties. "Are you wet for me?"

"Nobody else around," I said. I wasn't even sure why. Usually my brain-to-mouth filter was intact, but Danilo's mouth on my chest and between my legs had caused a major leak, in more than one sense. I let out an embarrassed laugh. I was absolute shit at sexy talk, obviously.

For a moment, Danilo stared at me as if I'd grown a second head, then he chuckled and brushed his lips across mine with a daring smile. His fingers slid across my temple. "But I don't know who's in there."

Of course, my brain jumped straight to wondering who was in Danilo's head while we made out, but his next words dispersed my worries at once. His gaze captured mine, his brown eyes so intense and all-consuming that my breath got stuck inside my chest. "You haunt my nights and days, and no matter what I do, I can't get you out of my head."

"I do?"

"Yeah," he murmured. "I can't stop thinking about your sexy body and all the things I want to do with it. You're driving me completely insane with desire, Sofia."

I gripped his neck and pulled him in for another kiss. "You are the only one in my head. I want you."

Danilo kissed me harder before his mouth traveled down my body to latch onto my nipple again.

He slid his finger under my panties, brushing over my heated flesh. I squeezed my eyes shut to focus on the sensations of the touch. When the pad of his finger graced my clit, it was as if parts of my body I hadn't been aware of came alive. I panted, one hand clutching the back of his neck to hold him in place against my breasts and the other fisting the sheepskin almost desperately.

"I need to taste you," Danilo growled and pulled away from my chest despite my attempts to keep him there. "Last night wasn't nearly enough." The knowing smile he gave me made me giggle but I fell silent when he slid down my panties and tossed them aside. The cool air hit my heated skin, stirring up my need even more. Danilo's eyes trailed down my body with what looked like reverence.

Danilo gently parted my legs.

"I want to see you as well," I breathed out.

He dragged his sweater over his head. He was so unbelievably sexy. Every inch of his chest was defined and

the fine trail of dark hairs disappearing in his pants almost drove me to the brink.

“Your pants,” I reminded him.

He shook his head, focused on my pussy. “First I’m going to get what I want.”

My core clenched in anticipation. All the fear, worry, and doubt flew out of my mind as my body took over, and I let it, delirious with the freedom it brought.

Sofia lay before me like a goddess, her legs parted, allowing me a beautiful view at her pretty pussy. Her clit was swollen and red, desperate for attention. Her pussy lips and ass cheeks glistened with her lust for me. Fuck. My body screamed to really make her mine, to sink myself into this gorgeous woman.

Instead, I traced her inner thigh with my index finger, slowly inching to the outside of her pussy lips. I’d longed to do this for weeks now. Every time I’d pleasured her with the vibrator, my body had screamed to taste, to feel, to sink into her.

Last night had been a start, a brief taste of my sexy wife. I needed more.

She clenched and her little nub seemed to swell even more. I groaned, my eyes seeking Sofia’s. She flushed but

didn’t look away. “I can’t wait to eat your beautiful pussy again.”

She bit her lip, eyes flashing with a hunger that went straight to my dick. I climbed between her legs and settled in. I braced myself on my elbows and parted her thighs even further to give me better access and a splendid view. Last night, I hadn’t been able to make out every beautiful detail of her pussy like I could now. Knowing Sofia was watching, I slowly licked a wet trail from her perky ass cheek to the little valley between her labia and inner thigh. Her need for me trickled out and I darted my tongue out and licked it off her crack. She gasped, her pussy clenching with need.

“Danilo,” she whispered. “Please.”

Fuck, she sounded as if my mouth was her salvation. She’d soon realize my tongue was better than any device. I’d eat her every day. Our eyes met again, and a sense of stark possession filled me at the sight of her gorgeous, needy face. Her lips were parted, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes begging me for more. “Do you want the vibrator?”

A quick shake of her head.

“Or do you want me to lick your pussy, gorgeous? To lick it deep and hard until you come on my tongue?”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly.

How could I deny her? How could I deny myself this fucking delicious treat? She smelled divine. I pressed the barest kiss to her engorged clit. Again, a clench and a sharp intake of breath. Her fingers tangled in my hair, almost painfully. I decided to stop the teasing. Sofia was already wet and ready for more.

Casting my eyes up to watch her face, I licked her little pearl with slow, deliberate licks, circling it with the tip of my tongue, applying only a whisper of pressure. I was rewarded with a shaky moan. I nuzzled her with my lips, exploring her soft folds with my tongue, tasting her. I dived between her lips and took a long lick up to her clit, taking my time so she could feel every nerve-ending in her beautiful pussy. But I

needed more. Fuck, I wasn't sure who of us needed this more. My mouth closed around her clit and I sucked, making her arch off the plush sheepskin with a moan. I reached up, catching her nipple between my fingers and tugging hard. It pebbled, and Sofia shoved her pussy against my face almost desperately, crying out. I pulled away to bring her down again, not wanting to make her come too quickly.

"You like it better when I suck you?" I asked, resting my cheek on her soft thigh. I wanted to give her everything she desired. Last night had been fueled by primal hunger and I hadn't paid nearly enough attention to her body's reaction, even though her orgasm had been a good indicator of her enjoying it.

"No," she said.

I raised my brows. A few months of celibacy didn't make me such a bad judge of a woman's body, did it?

"Both," she panted. "I like both."

I chuckled. "Let's find out what else you like."

She gave an eager nod, making me laugh again. But then I became serious as my lips found her clit again. I circled her with the tip of my tongue. Her approving nod told me her verdict. I dipped lower and pushed my tongue into her, enjoying the tight hold of her walls around me as I fucked her with my tongue.

"Oh God," she whispered, beginning to shake. I pulled away and kissed her thigh, taking my time to discover her before I focused on her pussy once more. Long licks with the flat of my tongue brought her close again, but much slower than before. She was so aroused the barest touch of her clit would set her off like a firecracker. I alternated between thrusts and flicks of my tongue until her entire body was racked with tremors and her fingers tugged sharply at my scalp. With a throaty cry, Sofia's back bowed and she came. I watched her lust-filled face, my mouth still buried in her pussy, feasting on her as she shuddered through her release.

She twitched and tried to push me away. Chuckling, I kissed her swollen pussy and crawled up her body, savoring the look of satisfaction on her face. Slowly, her eyes fluttered open and the look in them was stab and balm at once. Trust and love. I wasn't sure how a girl like her, so full of goodness, could love me. Not even because of all that I was—a murderer and criminal. It was one thing to sin against strangers or enemies, but I'd sinned against my own wife, someone I was supposed to protect from the day of our engagement. Instead, I'd run with my pride and bathed in self-loathing, hurting her in the process. That she was still willing to allow tenderness for me showed how kind-hearted she was. I'd long thought that I'd been bested, that Sofia had made a steal by marrying me in her sister's stead, but now I realized it was the other way around.

Where I was prideful, Sofia was humble.

Where I was vengeful, she was forgiving.

Where I was short-tempered, she was patient.

Sofia was too good for me, and that only made me want her only more—like a magpie drawn in by her shiny light.

I wasn't sure how long I'd been staring at her, but slowly her expression morphed to confusion and uncertainty, probably already looking for faults in her own actions or even herself, when it was me she should turn to when looking for flaws.

There were so many things I should have said, so many things I wanted to say, but again my pride held me back. Instead, I kissed her with all the passion still simmering under my skin and growled, "I want you, Sofia. I want nothing more."

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TWENTY-ONE

I smiled despite my nerves. I'd been dreaming about this day, about this moment for years.

Danilo kissed me again before he got up and slid down his pants and boxers. I'd seen him naked before and, as always, a wave appreciation overwhelmed me, drowning out most of my anxiety. That didn't last long, though. The moment Danilo settled between my legs, it returned with full force.

Danilo cradled my face, holding my gaze. "Relax for me, beautiful." Our eyes locked and slowly my body relaxed. His hand slid between my thighs and his touch quickly reminded me of the pleasure I'd felt before.

My body sprang to life when Danilo touched me. Soon, I was slick and ready. Danilo's face hovered close to mine and he didn't look away from my eyes once.

I smiled, his warmth and care surrounding me. For the first time, I felt truly seen by Danilo, as if he saw beyond what I wasn't and really noticed me for who I was. And even better than that, he seemed to like the real me.

His lips found mine and then he shifted. He eased into me. None of the expected pain came as he slowly slid into

me, taking his time to give my body the chance to grow used to the intrusion. I exhaled at the feeling of utter fullness. Danilo didn’t move, only kissed me gently, brows drawn together in concern. I tightened my hold on him and finally he moved. With every thrust, he seemed to bring us closer, not just physically but also emotionally, as if one barrier after the other was lowered until nothing was left between us. I didn’t allow fear of the emotional closeness to take root. I lived in the moment, in the feel of our united bodies. It was better than all my fantasies because it was real and perfect even with its small imperfections.

My eyes were locked on Sofia’s gorgeous face, on the way her pouty lips parted for another moan. I stroked away the strands of hair sticking to her forehead. Her breathing hitched again. Her walls fisted me tightly, giving me pleasure beyond measure. I thrust harder and lifted one of her legs over my back to change the angle. I needed to feel more of her.

Sofia gasped, a mix of pain and pleasure.

My movements became uncontrolled and I thrust into her harder. Her nails scraped along my back, her breath hitching. I knew she wouldn’t come, and so I allowed myself

to let loose, to lose myself in Sofia. My balls tightened and I pounded into her, until finally I exploded.

Sofia's eyes widened.

I kissed her cheek then her mouth, trying to catch my breath. "Are you okay?" I met her gaze and was rewarded with an exhausted smile.

"Yeah."

Pushing off Sofia, I carefully slid out of her and stretched out beside her. She snuggled close to me.

This felt perfect, feeling her body against mine. I wrapped my arms around her, wanting her even closer.

I kissed her temple, my fingers stroking the soft skin of her arm. The fire crackled in the fireplace and Sofia released a soft sigh.

"This was perfect."

"I'm glad you think so. I had a lot to make up for."

She looked up. "It was my fault, too. You couldn't have known it was me."

It was the first time she'd said it. It eased some of my guilt. Not all of it, though. "It's not just that. I was an idiot for a long time."

She didn't contradict me, and I chuckled.

"That's the past, I prefer to focus on the present."

"I wish I had your ability to let the past rest."

She peered up. "What do you mean?"

The hint of uncertainty in her voice told me she thought I was referring to Serafina. "My desire to get revenge on Remo Falcone. I can't let it drop. Whenever I hear his name or think about him, this insatiable need to destroy him arises. It's all about my pride."

"Hmm. Maybe you feel that you never got the chance for closure because Remo and my sister managed to escape."

I nodded. "Still, I should be able to let it pass. Things are going amazing for me. I have a wonderful wife and business is thriving. I long for nothing, and yet . . ."

"You want revenge," Sofia mused, stroking my arm.

“Yeah,” I murmured, then my lips twisted. “Not the most romantic topic right now.”

Sofia shook her head with a smile. “I always appreciate you sharing personal details with me. After being so close to you physically, it feels good to get closer to you emotionally as well.”

“Aren’t we close emotionally?” I asked. I’d tried to open up to her a bit more every day. I had always been a man who dealt with things on his own and didn’t talk about emotions, so sharing this part of me with others didn’t come easily.

“We are, but like you said, it takes time to really get to know each other.”

“We have time.”

She rolled over until we were both facing the fireplace and my cock was nestled against her firm butt. She arched into me with a soft laugh.

“I should warn you now that I’ve had you, I’ll want you every day, Mrs. Mancini.”

“I love it when you call me that,” she admitted.

I smiled against her hair. “I love that you have my name, that you’re mine.”

She nodded and covered my hand with hers.

At the feel of Sofia’s ass against me, blood gathered in my cock.

Sofia snuggled even closer, making me groan. She laughed. “We still have a few days and plenty of places to test out.”

I kissed her shoulder. “The lake, the sauna, the pool, the kitchen . . .”

“The bed?” Sofia said in a teasing voice.

“Even the bed.”

Sofia and I spent the next three days doing exactly that, fucking in every room of the lodge. Even better than the sex was cooking together, taking long walks through the forest

that I knew by heart and listening to Sofia’s hysteric giggles whenever she went into the cold lake.

On our last evening in the lodge, Danilo and I relaxed in the sauna. I slanted a look at Danilo’s erection. He’d pretty much sported one since we’d come down here naked. I knew what I wanted to do, but I wasn’t sure how to go about it. I’d given him a few hand jobs but had never gone down on him. We always ended up having sex so the opportunity had never presented itself.

I leaned closer to him and stroked the inside of his thigh.

Danilo cupped my neck, his eyes boring into mine. “I’ve been fantasizing about you on your knees for months now, how my cock would look in your beautiful mouth.”

I smiled because he always seemed to know what I desired. Every time Danilo told me he fantasized about me my confidence swelled. Emboldened, I sank to my knees until my face was at eye-level with Danilo’s cock. Danilo’s fingers tangled in my hair, nudging me forward. His eagerness made me giggle before I could stop myself.

“Sofia,” he rasped, a hint of exasperation fighting with need in his voice. He was desperate for my touch. Allowing the desire the vibrator created in my center to guide me, I leaned forward and closed my lips around the tip then

sucked like I'd done with his finger. Danilo hissed, his fingers against my scalp flexing.

"Not that hard," he grunted. "Let me show you."

His fingers stroked my neck as he began to shift his hips, sliding in and out of me. I only lightly closed my lips around him, worried about sucking too hard again, but soon I could tell that Danilo wanted more, and so I sucked harder again.

"Fuck yes," Danilo muttered, his thrusts gaining momentum. I cupped his ass cheek, enjoying the feel of its flexing. Danilo watched me the entire time as I sucked him. He made me feel as if I were the center of his world. I stroked his balls, wanting to see him lose it completely, and soon his face contorted and his movements became jerky.

"I'm coming," he warned.

I didn't pull back. I clung to him, and when he finally erupted in my mouth, I was so distracted by his passion-ridden face that I hardly minded the taste. I didn't dare moving. I wanted him to savor the moment and marveled at the spasms that took hold of him. He watched me the entire time as I swallowed, his expression burning up with desire.

After that, it was my turn to relax on my towel with Danilo's head buried between my legs. A midnight swim cooled us both off and afterward we settled on the sofa in front of the fireplace.

Danilo leaned in, his voice low, "I think I'm falling for you, Sofia. More every day I spend with you."

I'd been waiting to hear those words for years but now that he said them all I could think about was if his feelings were already stronger than the ones he'd had for my sister. I'd thought I had put the past to rest but this one thing kept rearing its ugly head.

"What about Serafina?"

His brows crashed together. "Serafina? Why would you ask about her when I told you I was falling for you?"

I gave him a look. He really didn't know? I sat up, hating myself for bringing her up, but at the same time unable to

put her out of my mind. Danilo sat up as well and cradled my face, forcing me to look at him.

“Sofia, what can I do so you’d stop comparing yourself to your sister? It’s been years.”

“Stop loving my sister, stop living with the regret of losing her.”

Danilo shook his head. “I told you I never loved your sister. I didn’t know her. I wanted her like a crow wants to possess a shiny piece of jewelry. I can’t deny I regretted losing her for the longest time, but it wasn’t because of my feelings for her. It was because of my hatred for Remo Falcone. I’ll never not want to kill that man.”

“You’re the proudest man I know.”

“I am, and that’s my greatest sin. Considering everything I’ve done, that says a lot, Sofia.” His eyes softened as he stroked my cheek. “I care about you, Sofia, and I’m falling for you. Maybe I already . . .” He sighed. Had he almost said he loved me? “I’m a cautious man when it comes to emotions. But believe me when I tell you that I’ve never loved another woman, not your sister and not anyone else.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss. Reclining on his shoulder, I whispered, “Then why did you really sleep with all those blonde women? And don’t tell me it’s because you like blondes because you definitely didn’t like me with blonde hair.”

“I hated it,” Danilo said without hesitation, his fingers playing with a strand of my hair. “I love your hair color. It’s beautiful. When I saw you in blonde, it looked all wrong.”

“Because I looked like a bad replica of my sister,” I guessed.

Danilo gave me a strange look. “If that’s how you want to put it. You reminded me of your sister, yes.”

Maybe I’d hoped he’d deny it, but I was glad he was being honest with me. “But you didn’t want to be reminded because it hurt too much, and you wanted her back and I wasn’t her.”

Danilo cupped my face. “No, that’s not it. I hated being reminded of your sister when I looked at you because I hated your sister. Whatever I might have felt for her once—and it wasn’t love—had turned ugly and dark. I didn’t want to feel hatred every time I looked at you. I didn’t want to be reminded of your sister’s actions when I was with you. Having Serafina’s appearance thrown at me like that threw me completely.”

“But if it’s only hatred you felt and if you didn’t want to be reminded of her, why did you seek out blonde women?”

He grimaced. “I’m not proud of it. You remember how I was with you when you wore that blonde wig?”

I nodded, even if I’d tried to forget it.

“I was being a selfish asshole with those blonde girls, seeking them for angry sex. I didn’t treat them right, not like I wanted to treat you, and when I fucked them it was to release some of that anger. It was messed up. I’m fucking messed up, but in some way, it felt like I was paying your sister back.”

I tilted my head, trying to understand his reasoning. I didn’t really understand it. But my actions hadn’t always been logical, either. I still cringed when I thought of dyeing my hair blonde to look like Serafina, as if by changing my hair color I could become her, replace her.

“I guess we both had some issues to work through.”

“I caused your issues. But you didn’t have a hand in my messed-up state.”

“They weren’t only caused by you, Danilo,” I said firmly. “The situation was complicated. Mom, Dad, Samuel, and so many more people mourned Fina so strongly that it made me feel inadequate. I thought I’d take Fina’s place in their hearts, as if her disappearance would leave an open slot behind that I could fill in, but instead it created a black hole that consumed everything around it. I wasn’t sure how to deal with it.”

Danilo took my hand and kissed my knuckles. “You were young, Sofia. If even we adults couldn’t handle the situation with grace, how were you supposed to do it?”

“I know that now, but back then I thought I was already old enough to handle everything.”

“But you weren’t. It was our job—my job—to protect you from everything and not bask in revenge.”

“It’s okay. All that matters is that I know you don’t have feelings for my sister.”

Danilo tipped his finger against my forehead. “Took your stubborn head long enough.”

I shrugged. “I guess we can both be stubborn at times.”

Danilo pulled me closer against him and my eyes began to droop as I watched the flames. I felt like I could really let the past rest now. I believed Danilo.

Once we were home, I’d call Fina. She wasn’t the problem, had probably never been. I missed her and wanted to talk to her.

Danilo kissed my neck, but his breathing evened out soon after.

Maybe I should have told him about my phone call with Fina and been completely honest, but I knew it wouldn’t do anything except make him furious.

The next morning as we headed back to Indianapolis, excitement filled me. I was looking forward to what lay ahead. Danilo held my hand throughout the entire drive. We had a dinner with Marco and Bria that evening, but I hoped to get the chance for a quick call with Fina before.

When we arrived at home, Danilo headed into his office for a few phone calls while I hurried outside toward the pond to watch the Koi. The staff had fed them. I settled on a nearby bench and called Fina’s number. She picked up after the third ring. “Sofia?”

“Fina,” I said quietly.

“Oh God, it’s really you. I’m so relieved. I was so worried about you when you didn’t answer my calls after your

wedding.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I needed to figure out a few things, but now that I have, I’d like to phone you weekly, if you still want that.”

“Of course. But tell me, are you all right? How’s married life?”

She sounded so excited and concerned at once, full-blown older sister mode.

“Good. We spent a few days at the lake to relax. I really like living in Indianapolis.” We talked about more meaningless details, like yoga and my cooking course, avoiding topics that could be considered betrayal.

When I ended the call, even the last bit of weight had lifted off my shoulder. I strolled back inside. Danilo was still on the phone from the sound of it. A brief flicker of guilt filled me, knowing I kept a secret, but I pushed it aside.

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TWENTY-TWO

I was close to dying from boredom and I could tell from Anna's strained expression that she was close to finding the same unfortunate end. We had been listening to the wives of a few Captains going on and on about the latest gossip for close to half an hour and had to pretend we were interested. Unlike me, Anna couldn't even slink off. As the Capo's daughter, she had to cater to everyone's whims. I, too, was required to follow the social etiquette as wife of an Underboss and hostess of my husband's birthday party.

I leaned closer to her. "Do you need another glass of champagne?"

She gave me a grateful look as I headed toward the bar. Bria waved at me from across the room, her black hair framing her face in a wild mane. After our dinner, we hadn't tried another double date. The tension between Marco and Bria had been too awkward. Now, I only met her alone.

Grabbing two flutes with champagne, I returned to Anna and the wives.

"Has a date been set for your wedding yet?" one of them asked Anna. Since she'd turned eighteen a few months ago, the question had been floating around the Outfit constantly.

Anna took the glass from me with a mouthed thanks and gave the woman a tight smile. “No, actually, there isn’t. I’m still busy with college, and so is Clifford.”

“College,” the woman scoffed. “In my time, women didn’t go to college. They became mothers to beautiful babies.” Her eyes zoomed in on me, and I suppressed a groan.

She patted my belly, making my eyes go wide. “And? Is there a little one in there? You’ve been married for a long time, and your husband is almost thirty.”

Anna hid a smile behind her glass.

I swallowed a snappy comment. Danilo and I had been married for seven months and people were already asking about children all the time. Danilo and I had never really discussed children. He knew I took the pill and had never asked me to stop taking it. I assumed we both needed more time. I definitely did. “We want to wait a bit.”

Anna got me off the hook after that by steering the conversation toward a bad nose-job the wife of the Cincinnati Underboss had gotten.

I relaxed and sipped at my champagne, zoning out of the conversation.

“Busy with work again, your husband. He’s such a workaholic. I never see him without his phone,” Anna muttered in my ear.

I followed her gaze to Danilo who stood with Dad, Dante, and Samuel but he was typing on his phone. Goosebumps erupted on my skin and my core tightened in anticipation. Danilo sought my gaze before he jabbed his finger down on his phone.

A soft vibration spread in my core. My muscles clenched involuntarily around the small remote-controlled bullet vibrator buried deep inside of me. The stimulation was at the lowest level, a sweet taste of what was to come. The first time Danilo had asked me to put a sex toy inside of me while we were at a social function, I’d been terrified of anyone finding out, but soon I’d discovered the perks of our

little secret. The vibrator was so quiet that nobody would ever notice it at a noisy party, and even if they heard the sound, they'd never think the sophisticated wife of an Underboss had a vibrator in her pussy that her poised husband was controlling to drive her to the brink.

Anna gave me a questioning look. "You look like you've just had an epiphany."

I giggled and clenched when the vibration got more intense. "My brain's starting to zone out."

"Maybe we should head for the dancefloor to escape."

Danilo was talking to Dante, seemingly oblivious to what I was doing, but one of his hands was casually stuffed into his pants, controlling my vibrator, my lust, and with it my whole body.

"Danilo's busy."

"Then dance with someone else. Just because you're married doesn't mean you can't dance with others."

I wasn't sure if I wanted to dance with another man while small bolts of pleasure spread through my core.

I excused myself and headed for Danilo, despite Anna's rolled eyes. I grabbed Danilo's arm and gave my uncle a smile. "Hello, Uncle Dante."

"Sofia."

Danilo touched my bare back and the minimal contact of skin on skin intensified the sensations in my body.

"Are you quite all right? You look flushed," Dante said.

Danilo's lips twitched, and as if on cue he upped the vibration. I swallowed, my belly clenching. Wetness pooled between my legs and my clit ached for attention.

I smiled. "It's a little warm in here. How about we take a stroll in the gardens, Danilo?"

"Would you excuse us?" he asked.

Dante nodded and returned to Valentina. Instead of leading me outside, we headed for the dance floor.

"Danilo," I whispered. "I really want to be alone with you."

“A dance first,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to my ear.

I huffed but let him pull me against his body.

We swayed to the music. I loved dancing with Danilo, loved the feel of his strong body against mine, but most of all, I loved the look in his eyes, as if he wanted to devour me. His desire burned brightly and would have ignited both of us if we weren’t surrounded by people. I’d never imagined I’d experience this kind of pleasure, this almost boundless lust. I’d hoped for love and tenderness, but I’d never taken this into consideration.

Maybe because Danilo hadn’t seemed like a passionate man. He’d seemed controlled and only prone to angry outbursts. But not passion.

“You look distracted,” he murmured.

His controlled mask rarely cracked in public. Over the years, but especially in recent months, I had also perfected the mask of an unattainable ice princess. People considered us both to be cold and in control, character traits our families were famous for. In the past, holding up that appearance had been strenuous, as if I had to become someone else in public, an invisible prison, but Danilo had taught me to see it as a game of hide-and-seek. A masquerade where only he and I knew what was really going on behind the mask. We carved out our small chunks of freedom, undetected by anyone.

“You know exactly what’s distracting me.”

“You mean . . .” he murmured in a low, sexy voice and turned the vibrations up another notch. “This?”

I gripped his arm and shoulder, gasping softly at the rise in pleasure. Luckily, I usually couldn’t come without my clit being stimulated, which spared me an embarrassing orgasm on the dancefloor.

“Maybe we should get you a remote-controlled penis ring,” I teased in a whisper.

Danilo chuckled, his lips dragging from my cheek to my ear. “But unlike you, I can’t hide it when I’m horny. It’s sweet

torture keeping my cock in check just thinking of how soaking wet you are."

"I am," I agreed. "My panties are drenched. I need you."

Danilo released a low breath, his eyes practically burning with desire for me. The song finally ended, and Danilo led me away from the dancefloor.

After a torturous chat with one of his Captains and his wife, we finally managed to sneak away. Danilo led me to the guest bathroom and locked us in. I reached for his zipper, but he stopped me and pushed my back against the sink. "Lift your skirt."

I grabbed the hem of my cocktail dress and pulled it up until my panties and stockings came into view. A wet spot was visible on the dark red fabric of my thong.

"So fucking wet," Danilo growled. He took out the remote control and lowered the vibration, then he sank down on the closed toilet and dragged down my panties. In the silence of the bathroom the soft hum of the vibrator was unmistakable.

"Your clit is begging for attention," Danilo murmured.

I stepped closer.

He gripped my hips. He stood and kissed me sensually until my toes curled. Pulling back, Danilo pushed a finger into my mouth. "Suck."

I did, my gaze frozen on Danilo's harsh face. Desire twisted his features and made him look like the man I remembered from the night of the masked party. But now I wasn't scared or confused. This dominant, dark side of Danilo turned me on. I closed my lips firmly around his thumb and sucked hard. Danilo released a sharp breath, his lips opening as he watched me. It was strange sucking someone's finger but also so unbelievably hot, especially because I knew what it reminded Danilo of. Danilo turned the vibrations up once more and I gasped around his finger. Our breathing was harsh even though we hadn't done much yet.

Danilo slid out his finger and kissed me harshly, his body pressing into mine. I clung to him, as desperate for his touch as he seemed for mine. His cock dug into my lower belly. “I want to fuck your mouth, gorgeous.”

I bit my lip, my core clenching, increasing the delicious sensation deep within. I hadn’t given Danilo a blowjob at a social gathering yet, mainly because we always ended up fucking quickly, but also because my lips would be swollen afterward and would draw attention to what we had done.

Danilo upped the vibration, lightly biting my lower lip, his eyes full of desire. “Let me fuck that tight throat as a birthday present.”

“You already got a present,” I murmured before I dropped to my knees, no longer caring if my lips would be swollen. I tugged Danilo’s pants and boxers down. His cock was rock-hard and leaking pre-cum. Danilo cupped the back of my head and plunged into my mouth. I clung to him as he worked his shaft all the way in, past my gag reflex. He groaned as he buried himself deep inside me. His cock twitched.

“Fuck. I always have to stop myself from coming when you deep-throat me.”

I couldn’t say anything with him inside of me, but I squeezed his balls, causing him to hiss. Fingers tightening against my scalp, he slowly pulled out almost all the way until only his tip rested on my tongue. With his eyes locked on mine, he pushed back in and established a fast rhythm. My eyes watered and my lips and throat felt tender as he fucked my mouth, but I didn’t dream of stopping.

I was on the brink myself, so close to release I felt like sobbing. I wanted to touch myself, but even more than that I yearned for Danilo’s touch, his tongue, his cock.

Danilo grunted and hissed, his face completely out of control. Saltiness spread on my tongue and his balls tightened in my palm. He was getting closer, and my body

answered with a new flood of wetness. “Open your mouth,” he growled.

I parted my lips wider and a second later his hot release landed on my tongue. He shuddered as his cock twitched, sending spurt after spurt of cum into my mouth. I swallowed eventually, then swirled my tongue around his tip. Danilo pumped his shaft in and out of my mouth, much slower than before, and then he stilled.

I pulled back, breathless. Danilo closed his eyes and stood motionless for a couple of heartbeats. I smiled. I loved it when he lowered his barriers.

He pulled me up to my feet and kissed me, our bodies flush together. He buried his face in my neck, his teeth nicking my skin, making me arch against him. My body throbbed with desire. I needed to feel him, to have him in me. The vibrator wasn’t nearly enough.

Danilo stepped back, the remote in his hand. “Lift your skirt.”

I did and Danilo edged down my panties. I held my breath, waiting for him to touch me. Instead, he turned up the vibration. I gasped, my pussy clenching. He ran his knuckles over my folds, barely touching.

“Danilo!” I begged. He got down on his knees and I thought he’d finally grant me release. Instead, he turned me to face the mirror. He parted my ass cheeks and licked over my crack. I moaned loudly then bit my lip. My face was bright red, my lips swollen, and desire swirled in my eyes. I looked completely wanton and I loved it. I jutted out my ass, giving Danilo better access. He straightened and pressed his thumb against my ass, using his saliva to enter me. “I want my cock in your ass.” My lips fell open at the sensation. We’d done some assplay before, mainly Danilo tonguing me or putting a finger into me during sex. Anal sex, however, we’d tried only twice, and it was still a sensation I had to get used to. I hadn’t felt much more than slight discomfort so far, but I had never been hornier than I was now.

Danilo reached into the drawer of the wash table and pulled out lube.

I gave him a disbelieving look. I sincerely hoped none of our guests had peeked into our drawers.

He smirked. “I come prepared.”

He squeezed a generous amount of lube onto his cock and spread it while I watched him, mesmerized. He reached for the remote and upped the vibrations once more until I let out a soft moan, my hips rocking with the sensation. He stroked my back and made me lean forward until my ass was propped up in front of him and I was supporting myself on my elbows on the marble counter, my face close to the mirror.

I was so desperate for release, for penetration, that I didn’t feel a hint of dread when he pressed up to me, his shaft parting my ass cheeks. When his tip nudged my crack, he kissed my shoulder blade and cupped my sex, pressing against my clit. I moaned again, seconds from exploding. He pushed forward, sliding his tip into me at the same time as his thumb swiped over my clit. The pain sent me over the edge. I tensed, on the verge of splintering, and then the tight ball of my pleasure released like a seismic explosion. My body tightened and I whimpered as I came. Danilo grabbed my throat, jerking my face toward him for a harsh kiss to swallow my cry. As I rocked through my orgasm, almost insane from the vibrations deep in my core, Danilo worked his cock deeper into me until his balls pressed against my butt.

I panted, my palms flat on the marble counter, my forehead almost touching the mirror.

“Fuck, Sofia. I’m balls deep in your beautiful ass. I wish you could see it,” he rasped.

With his hand stroking my throat, his eyes pinning me down with their possessiveness, he began to thrust into me, gently at first but soon faster and harder, his balls slapping against the back of my thighs. Every thrust seemed to

increase the vibrations of the bullet, and soon I could feel another release approaching.

The knock at the door made me flinch.

“Hello?” a male voice called.

“Occupied,” Danilo barked. Silence followed, but I couldn’t help but wonder if the person had heard us. I had trouble keeping my moans down and Danilo’s grunts, too, were unmistakable, as were the slapping sounds of his balls against my ass.

I listened for footsteps, trying to determine if the man had left.

Danilo bit down on my neck lightly. “Stay here. Your mind and body are mine.”

He accentuated his words with a flick of his thumb against my clit. I bit down on my lip, stifling a moan. I was getting closer when he retreated.

“Danilo,” I begged, but he only lightly traced my inner thighs and labia, the touch so fleeting it was sweetest torture. When his fingertips brushed my clit lightly, I let out a frustrated whine, but Danilo locked gazes with me and kept up his featherlight caress. Sweat glistened on his face and his shoulders flexed as he slammed into me. It was a sensation unlike anything I’d ever felt before, the feel of his length inside this part of me and the additional stimulation of the bullet vibrator in my pussy. My body yearned for release, my clit already pulsating with need despite the almost-not-there-touches.

The feel of my cock inside of Sofia’s ass and the distant vibration of the toy in her pussy let my pleasure skyrocket. It took every ounce of self-control not to come right away, especially watching Sofia’s face in the mirror. Her lips were red from sucking me off and her face was flushed. With every thrust of my cock, she rocked forward, her fingers digging into the marble counter. Her lips were parted, and every moan was sweet melody in my ears. I stroked her throat, then pulled her head back for another deep kiss, stilling a moment to really savor the moment of being buried all the way inside of her. The hum of the vibrator mingled with our panting. Sofia’s lashes fluttered before her eyes opened, staring right back at me. Goddamn, this woman.

I kissed her again and began thrusting. Sofia arched under another orgasm and I couldn’t hold back either. With a shudder, I came inside of her. My vision turned black for a moment, and I could barely breathe from the intensity. I let my forehead sink down on Sofia’s neck, breathing in her sweet scent. She softened under me and I traced my fingertips over her throat, feeling her racing pulse.

“That was intense,” I admitted, my voice hoarse.

“Remote,” Sofia whispered. I fumbled for the control and turned off the vibrations. We remained connected, and when I opened my eyes, Sofia was smiling exhaustedly. A few months ago, she’d cut her hair into a bob with bangs again and now it was all over the place. Her bangs stuck to her

forehead and the rest of her hair stood out to all ends. Her face was red, her lips swollen. I smiled. “Fuck, you’re gorgeous, Mrs. Mancini. I love you.”

I paused, surprised by the words, not by their meaning. My feelings for Sofia had grown more every day. I was shocked that my pride had allowed me to admit to them.

Sofia blinked, then burst out laughing. Not quite the reaction I’d expected. When she calmed down, she said, “If I’d known it would take this to make you say it, I’d have let you have a go at my ass more often.”

I laughed, realizing the absurdity. I carefully pulled out of her and we quickly freshened up. Once we were halfway presentable, I pulled Sofia against me once more. “I mean it.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I love you, too.” I kissed her, then ran my thumb over her swollen lip. She traced it with her tongue, then took out a lipstick to cover up any trace of what we’d done.

“I liked it better when I could see what we’ve been doing.”

She gave me a coy look and unlocked the door, poking her head out. Then she opened it all the way and hurried outside. I smirked at her obvious worry of being caught and followed a few steps after her, giving her time to enter the living area alone. We’d opened the sliding doors to the dining area to create enough room for all the guests.

Marco waved me over and handed me a drink. “You look fucking delirious.”

I smiled. “Not delirious, just content.” For maybe the first time in my life, I felt really content.

He gave me a questioning look. “I told you marrying Sofia would have positive effects in the long run. A younger woman always gets your blood pumping.”

“Bria gets your blood pumping, too, but you don’t seem content,” I joked.

“Very funny. You keep your young wife happy and I’ll deal with mine.”

My eyes darted across the room to where Sofia was talking to Bria. When Sofia noticed my gaze, she gave me one of those secretive smiles.

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TWENTY-THREE

My heart seemed to beat in my throat. I hadn't seen Serafina in so many years. I wondered if it would be like meeting a stranger. Talking to someone on the phone just wasn't the same as seeing someone. We'd been talking weekly in the year since I'd married Danilo, but there was always a bit of distance between us because so many topics were off limits.

Would it be awkward?

I fumbled with my purse, suddenly nervous, which was funny, considering the reason I should really be worrying was because I was meeting with the enemy. Even though Fina was my sister, she was now regarded as part of the Camorra and thus the Outfit's—and my—enemy. Mafia politics were unforgiving and indifferent to familial bonds. Once someone was deemed a traitor, emotional bonds didn't matter anymore.

If Danilo knew I was here, he'd be furious. He hated the Camorra and Remo Falcone with a fiery passion. His feelings toward my sister were harder to guess. He didn't like talking about her, and I'd opted to pretend that she'd never been

part of his life. From his last remarks, it seemed he hated her, too, which was why I knew he'd be against our reunion.

A car pulled up in the parking lot in the middle of nowhere in Missouri that we'd chosen as the meeting point. Danilo was on a business trip in Chicago and I'd stayed home, blaming my college workload. I'd snuck out very early in the morning and taken a rental car. It was now early in the afternoon, and I'd sent Carlo a message telling him I was sick in bed and needed time to rest.

When the car stopped, my heart started to race. The door on the driver side opened, and a tall dark-haired man got out. Fear slithered through my veins when I recognized his face as Remo Falcone. I took a step back, on the verge of running back to my car, when the passenger door opened and Fina appeared. She smiled brightly. My eyes darted from her to her husband. What if this was a trap? Falcone had no qualms when it came to kidnapping. If I got into the Camorra's hands, my family would be destroyed once and for all, and Danilo would never forgive me.

Fina said something to Remo and he gave a short nod, scanned our surroundings again, then slid back into the car.

I didn't relax, unable to take my eyes off Remo. Fina headed toward me, and I finally dragged my eyes away from the car. When Fina stopped in front of me, I was shocked to discover we were almost the same height. I'd always remembered her as much taller. Of course, I'd been only twelve the last time I'd seen her.

For a moment, we only stood across from each other. Then Fina bridged the distance between us and pulled me into her arms. I sank into her, feeling like a part of me had returned. Fina hugged me so tightly I could barely breathe, but I didn't try to free myself. There wouldn't be many more chances for us to meet.

"God, I missed you so much, ladybug." She pulled back. "And I can't believe how grown up you are. Whenever I

thought about you, I still imagined that small twelve-year old, but you've become such a beautiful woman."

She regarded my face and I did the same with hers. She was still gorgeous, but she'd changed. In the past, she'd always held herself a certain way, always with a hint of caution as if at any moment someone might be waiting to judge her actions. Now, she exuded an air of indifference, as if she couldn't care less what anyone thought about her.

"I'd hoped you'd bring the twins," I said quietly.

Fina sighed. "You know how it is."

My eyes darted to the car and Remo Falcone. Of course, I knew the rules and a Made Man's vigilance. Remo would have never allowed his children to be in danger. But I wasn't sure if it was only his worry that led to the decision. Fina was a lioness when it came to her children. She probably would have been wary to have them here. We were sisters, but we also stood on different sides of the war.

"I know."

Fina motioned at a bench nearby. "Why don't we sit down for a bit and talk?"

We sat down, and for a moment silence reigned between us. It was strange being together again. I'd secretly hoped it would be the same between us, as if distance and time hadn't touched our relationship, but that had been foolish. We had changed, so how could our relationship have remained unchanged?

"How are things between you and Danilo? You've been married for what? Eleven months now?"

I nodded. Our anniversary was in a week, which was perhaps why I'd felt the need for this meeting to really bring this year to an end. "Good," I said. There was so much more to say, about our struggles in the beginning, about my occasional worries and doubts, and how much it had taken for me to overcome them. But my loyalties lay with Danilo, so sharing our former problems was out of the question. Danilo had done nothing to make me doubt myself these

last few months, but the seed of doubt had been planted long ago, and it was far more difficult to burn out than I'd thought.

Fina regarded me. "That's good to hear. I was so worried about you, and I felt terrible because you had to take my place. It felt as if I'd stolen part of your life by choosing not to marry Danilo."

I linked our fingers, shaking my head. "Nonsense. You know I had a crush on Danilo. For me to be promised to him was the best thing that could have happened to me."

And it was. Every day, Danilo and I became stronger as a couple. I loved him and I couldn't imagine loving anyone else, so ultimately Fina's decisions had given me what I wanted. If she'd stayed in the Outfit, her presence would have been a ballast for my relationship with Danilo. Now, she had a chance at happiness with her family in Vegas and I could be happy with Danilo in Indianapolis. It was the best option for both of us.

"Are you and Danilo already trying for a baby?"

I shook my head. "Not yet. We needed to get to know each other first. That wasn't really possible before our wedding."

"Yeah," Fina agreed. "With all of the social rules, people are forced to enter their marriage as strangers."

I could hear the blatant disapproval for the system in her voice. In the past, she'd been a master of the Outfit's rules, but she'd obviously grown out of them. Living in Camorra territory probably left her no choice. "What about you? Don't you want more kids?"

Fina's eyes widened and she laughed. "Maybe one day. Nevio's still keeping me on my toes. If I get another one of him . . ." She laughed again.

I giggled. "I get that."

Another car pulled up and my stomach plummeted when I recognized a familiar face behind the steering wheel. For a moment, I was frozen, unsure of what to do.

“Oh no,” Fina whispered. “This is going to get ugly.”

I pushed to my feet when Danilo got out of the car. Remo shoved open the door of his car and exited. The men looked at each other like predators about to rip into each other. Danilo’s face flooded with rage and utter hatred as he regarded the other man. My pulse sped up, and my mouth dried up. I staggered forward, not sure how to prevent a bloodbath. Fina rushed over to her husband. When I reached Danilo, he’d already drawn his gun and was pointing it straight at Remo, who had his own gun directed at us.

Danilo dragged me behind him the moment I was within reach. Anger and disappointment flashed in his eyes. “How could you do this?” he growled.

“I needed to see her again. I missed her.”

Danilo shook his head, and his attention returned to Remo and Fina. I followed his gaze and suddenly dread took hold of me. Fina’s blonde hair whipped in the light breeze, and with her white flowy boho dress, she looked like an angel. She glowed, an apparition straight out of the past, a memory that had haunted me, my family, and Danilo for years.

In the last few months, I’d started to believe that Danilo had gotten over Fina, that he was happy in our marriage, that he loved me, but what if this set us back? What if seeing her again reminded him of what he’d lost? Of buried feelings? What if this destroyed everything? I couldn’t live through months or years of feeling like a replacement again. I was done being the consolation prize, done being second best.

I searched his face as he stared ahead but couldn’t read the look in his eyes. His face was twisted with fury. I clutched at his arm. “Let’s go. I got what I wanted. I got the chance to talk to Fina. Let’s leave now before this ends badly.”

Fina was obviously appealing to Remo to keep this peaceful, her palms pressed to his chest. His expression

didn’t give me much more hope than Danilo’s did. The hatred born from hurt pride didn’t dominate his features, but bloodlust and the determination to eliminate a possible threat were unmistakable.

Danilo’s eyes flashed. “You got what you wanted, Sofia? Is that so? What about me and what I want?”

I dropped my hand, my heart shrinking to the size of a tiny ball as his words sank in. What he wanted? Did he still want Fina? Was this his chance to kill Remo and take my sister for himself?

I was being ridiculous. That would never work. But was Danilo being rational or driven by old hurt and pride?

I swallowed hard. “I’m done.” The words cut me as they moved past my aching heart and throbbing throat.

Danilo glowered at me. “What?”

“I’m done with this, with us, with you. If you still want her, I’m done. I’m not doing this again. I’m not a consolation prize.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Sofia?” he gritted out, looking honestly confused and pissed.

“Fina. You said what about what you want.”

Danilo grabbed my arm, his eyes scorching mine. “It’s not Serafina I want. It’s revenge. Revenge on Falcone for humiliating me and the Outfit, for trashing our pride.”

I blinked up at him. “So, you really don’t want Fina anymore?”

“I thought we’d agreed on that fact a long time ago when I told you I love you. I thought I’d proven it to you.”

We had agreed on that, and I had believed his words to be true, but until now he’d never been confronted with Fina, and who knew what that might change?

Danilo tore his gaze away from me and raised his gun even higher.

Fina had ripped away from Remo and stormed toward us. I squeezed past Danilo’s restraining arm, and got in front of him, touching his chest. “Don’t let this spiral out of control,

Danilo. Things between the Outfit and the Camorra have been calm recently. If you start a shooting match with Remo, the war will turn bloody once more and none of us will live in peace." I paused, pleading with my eyes. "If you love me, give up on your thirst for revenge. Whatever Remo has done, does it even matter now? If he hadn't kidnapped Fina, we would have never married. I know it's difficult to see past your pride, but isn't our marriage a reason to look past your hatred?"

Fina stopped a few feet from us. Remo had followed her a few steps. His gun was still trained on us. Danilo gripped my wrist and jerked me behind his back once more. "Stay behind me."

My heart sank.

"Danilo, please don't let this turn into an open war," Fina appealed to him, her voice compelling and smooth.

I glanced from her beautiful face to Danilo, dreading what I'd see.

"Do you really think I'm going to listen to you, Serafina? You are the enemy. Your words are worthless. If I negotiate with anyone, it's with Remo, not his wife. But I have absolutely no intention of negotiating with either of you." His words dripped with disdain and his expression only reflected contempt. There was no sign of longing, desire, or affection for Fina in his eyes.

"Danilo—"

"The only reason why I'm not ending this right here, right now, is because, unlike your husband, I listen to reason. You and he aren't worth risking the unity of the Outfit."

Remo gave Danilo a twisted smile. "Nice speech."

I gripped Danilo's bicep, worried the provocation would get to him, but he returned Remo's smile with the same amount of condescension. His palm pressed against my belly, nudging me in the direction of the car. Fina and I looked at each other. Seeing each other had been wonderful but at the same time we'd encountered this invisible barrier

between us. I glanced up at Danilo and Fina at Remo. We had both made our choice. We'd always be sisters, always try to be part of the other's life in small ways, but what had been was lost. We had changed, our views on the world had changed, and our loyalties to our husbands trumped our sisterly bond.

I allowed Danilo to guide me toward the car as he kept his gun trained on Remo. After I'd sank down on the passenger seat, my gaze sought Fina once more. She was looking my way. She was smiling, and I couldn't help but do the same. A hint of wistfulness filled me, but mostly I was relieved that we'd gotten the chance to see each other, albeit briefly, and make sure the other was happy. As long as we knew that, distance didn't matter. Our lives couldn't mesh, not without risking the happiness and safety of other people.

Danilo started the car without a word, but before we pulled away, I waved at Fina. Her smile widened, even though I could tell she was fighting tears. My own eyes stung, but I didn't cry. A strange mix of sadness, happiness, and relief filled me.

Shortly before Fina disappeared from view, Remo wrapped his arms around her from behind and she leaned into him. Fina was truly happy. I'd occasionally worried that wasn't the case, but now I didn't have the slightest doubt.

Then I remembered my rental car. "The car!"

"They can charge us extra and pick it up themselves, I don't give a fuck."

His anger sizzled between us.

"How did you know?"

He slanted me a furious look. "Carlo got suspicious."

I nodded. "I'm sorry for disappointing you."

He didn't reply. I jumped when he took my hand and linked our fingers. He wasn't looking at me, and his brows puckered in a way that told me he was still pissed.

"I needed to see her," I said.

“You should have talked to me before going off on your own.”

“You wouldn’t have allowed it.”

“Of course not,” he growled, giving me an exasperated look.

“Are you worried this’ll reflect badly on you?”

He muttered something under his breath that I didn’t catch, and he looked even angrier, if that was possible.

“Maybe you don’t have to tell Dante. It can be our secret.”

“No,” he clipped.

I tried to read his expression, wondering if he was worried that I’d let something slip by accident. “I can keep a secret.”

“Oh, I know, as you exhibited with your trip to meet your sister. It’s not you I’m worried about. It’s Remo. He might tell Dante about our meeting. He knows how to turn things like this to his advantage and sow seeds of disorder and discord. It’s his particular talent.”

“I didn’t even think about that.”

“That’s what I figured,” he muttered, making me feel stupid and small. “It was insanity. I know you’re young, but you need to think before you act.”

His words hit me like a whip. The anger on his face seemed to grow with every passing second, which confused me, but I wouldn’t let him treat me like one of his soldiers. I might be young, but I was his wife and deserved better.

“Don’t blame this on my youth. Fina is much older and she came all the way to see me.”

Danilo shot me a glare. “But she was clever enough not to come alone. She told her husband about her plan. She had someone to keep her safe. You went on your own.”

“Like you said, you wouldn’t have allowed me to meet her. I knew that. And there was no one else I could take. I didn’t want to risk Anna’s life.”

Danilo gave me a look. “Only your own.”

I bit my lip. I hadn’t really thought all that much about it. I hadn’t even considered that Fina would bring her husband along, but of course it was the sensible choice. The Camorra and the Outfit were at war after all.

Danilo didn’t say another word, but his disapproval rang loudly. I was torn between anger and guilt. When we finally arrived home after a grueling eight-hour drive, I was emotionally and physically exhausted. I staggered out of the car. Danilo appeared at my side at once, his hand on my lower back as if he didn’t trust me to walk inside on my own.

I glared at him, but he seemed lost in thought, or more likely his anger. The moment we stepped into our bedroom, my own frustration burst out of me. “I know you’re worried this’ll reflect badly on you and that people will think you can’t control me. You’re probably worried that Remo used me to trample on your pride again.”

Danilo grabbed my upper arms firmly, breathing harshly. “Fuck Falcone and fuck my pride. I was fucking terrified something might happen to you. Falcone is unpredictable. Even your sister couldn’t stop him if his crazy mind came up with the plan to kidnap and torture you. The idea of losing you almost killed me, and you talk about pride?”

Finally, I recognized the emotion behind the anger. It was worry. “You were scared of losing me?”

Danilo growled. “Of course. I love you. I can’t bear the thought that something might happen to you because I’m not there to protect you. Serafina and Emma got hurt when I was away, and it almost broke me, but with you . . . with you, I don’t think I could actually live with myself. You are my life, Sofia. Don’t ever risk your health or life again.”

I blinked, stunned by his words.

“Why is it so hard for you to believe that you mean the world to me?”

“Because I’m stupid.”

Danilo had showed me in so many ways that he loved me and worried about me, but I just had to cling to my own

insecurities.

“Promise me to never do something like this again. Swear it. I need to be able to trust you.”

“You can,” I said. “I won’t ever keep something from you again, I swear. But I’m going to keep talking to Fina. I don’t want to lose her completely.”

“You can talk, but no meetings. It’s too dangerous. Your sister is no longer on our side.”

“I know. She’s on her husband’s side, and I’m on mine.”

Danilo kissed me firmly and his arms slung around me in a possessive hold. His previous anger and worry poured into the kiss, turning it harsher and more passionate. I clung to his jacket, standing on my tiptoes for leverage. Danilo pressed me back with his body, his hand kneading my ass-cheek, his fingers occasionally slipping lower, brushing my crotch. His erection dug into my lower belly as he guided me backwards.

My calves bumped into the bed, but Danilo didn’t let me fall. He held onto me, forcing me to surrender to the kiss. I ground my ass against his palm, wanting to feel him where I needed him, but he refused to move.

His kiss burned with angry passion, lighting my body on fire. His fingers ripped at the buttons of my pants, then he shoved them down with my panties, leaving my lower half bare and eager for his attention. I pressed into him, hooking one of my legs over his hip to grind myself against him almost frantically. Danilo pulled out of the kiss, his eyes burning into me. I wasn’t sure if he was still angry and if he was trying to punish me. I didn’t care, I just wanted him to keep going. He grabbed the hem of my shirt and shoved it over my head. A rip sounded but neither he nor I slowed. As he fumbled with the hook of my bra, I reached for his zipper and jerked it down. Reaching inside, I found him hot and hard. His answer to my touch was almost a snarl. He pulled me against his chest for another harsh kiss before he whirled me around. His cock dug into my ass as he leaned

down to whisper harshly into my ear. “On your knees on the bed. Now, Sofia.”

I shuddered, desire pooling in my belly at his commanding tone. I climbed on the bed, lowering myself on my palms. Danilo stroked my butt before he slowly worked his way up my spine. He paused against my neck, then pushed gently. “Get down. I want a prime view of your pussy.”

Biting my lip to stifle an overeager moan, I lowered myself to my elbows, but Danilo kept pushing until my arms were stretched out above my head and my forehead was pressed into the pillow. My ass jutted out and cool air hit my soaked center.

“Perfect,” Danilo said in a low voice as he rubbed my ass cheeks. “You’ve got such a pretty pussy, Sofia. I could stare at it forever.”

I wanted him to do more than just stare. I needed more. I wiggled my ass in invitation. Danilo chuckled, then startled me by biting into my ass cheek. “You disobeyed me once today. Don’t make me angry again.”

If he’d stop being so damn sexy when he was angry, it would be easier. I angled my head so I could look down my body and see Danilo behind me. His pants fell to the floor and his muscular legs came into view. Would he slam into me right away? My core clenched at the idea of his cock inside of me. While his anger had scared me off in the past, it now turned me on.

I wanted his mouth on me, but I was also eager for his cock. Danilo palmed my ass and opened me up. He breathed out sharply, then got down on his knees behind me. I couldn’t see his face, but then his tongue was there between my ass cheeks, lightly teasing at first, then firmer. He seemed to awaken new nerve-endings I didn’t know existed. His tongue traced me almost lazily, and despite the initial surprise, my body went into overdrive. I tried to push closer to his mouth for more, but his strong hands kept my

ass cheeks in their hold, keeping me in place as Danilo feasted on me.

Despite how good this felt, I needed friction on my clit. I wanted to come. My arms were sluggish and heavy, but I began to move one down to touch myself.

“No,” he ordered.

“I need to touch myself.”

“No,” he said again followed by a swirl of his tongue over my crack. I bit my lip, feeling wetness trickle out of me and down my inner thigh. Danilo eased back and then his face came into view, his stubbled, manly chin. His tongue darted out and he licked up the trail of my lust for him, but he stopped before he reached my pussy.

“Danilo, please touch my clit,” I whispered. It was the first time I’d uttered the word, but I wasn’t embarrassed. I was horny and needed to feel his mouth and fingers on my clit.

Danilo lazily licked my inner thigh. I watched his mouth and tongue almost mesmerized and also a bit despairing because they weren’t where I needed them.

Then finally, when I was sure I’d lose my mind, he slid his tongue between my pussy lips, stroking, tasting. I gasped into the pillow, my eyes squeezing shut briefly from the sensation of Danilo circling my clit. He nudged my thighs further apart before he pushed his tongue into me, fucking me with it slowly.

I came with a harsh cry, my nails digging into the mattress, my butt pressing against Danilo’s face. Then his mouth and tongue were gone, and his hands clamped down on my hips. He slid his tip along my slit, picking up my wetness. He groaned low in his throat. I pushed up on my elbows and threw him a teasing smile over my shoulder. “Feels good?”

He smirked. “Feels like paradise. But I know what’ll feel even better.”

“Wha—”

I cried out as Danilo slammed into me. Pleasure radiated from my core to every nerve-ending in my body.

“Feels good?” Danilo asked with a chuckle.

“Like paradise,” I got out.

“It does.” He pulled almost all the way out, only to slam back into me. I lowered my head back down on the pillow, my fingers clutching the pillow as I moaned into the pillow.

Danilo pounded into me hard and fast. One of his hands held me by the hip, the other cupped my neck. He wasn’t holding me in place, but the mere touch of his strong palm on my neck turned me on. I whimpered with every thrust.

I couldn’t hold it back any longer.

“Yes, come for me, gorgeous,” Danilo rasped. His fingers found my clit and flicked it, and I exploded with an ear-splitting cry. Danilo followed me with a groan, his movements becoming jerky and uncoordinated until he finally stopped. His fingers stroked my neck gently, then traveled over my scalp. He placed a soft kiss on my shoulder. I lifted my head, even though it felt like lead, and turned it to the side. Our lips met for a sated kiss before Danilo pulled out of me. I moaned softly again, still sensitive. I dropped to my side, exhausted and satisfied. Danilo stretched out behind me and pulled me against him, his arm wrapped tightly around my waist. “I’ll protect you till the end of my days.”

I touched his hand. “I know.”

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EPILOGUE

I'd always wanted kids, and not just because I needed an heir who could become Underboss one day. I wanted a family and the special bond a father shared with his children. I still often missed my father, the long conversations about business, sports, and pretty much anything else. He'd been my most trusted confidante. I trusted Marco and knew he wouldn't betray me, but it was still not quite the same as the bond with my father had been. I didn't discuss everything I would have discussed with my father with him.

Sofia was young and I knew she needed a few years before she'd be ready to have children. I was willing to give her the time she needed even if I couldn't wait forever.

Shortly after her twenty-third birthday, Sofia bridged the subject again herself, surprising me. We'd had dinner at our favorite fine-dining restaurant and afterward taken a naked swim in the pool before making love in the shower. Now we lay in each other's arms in bed, sated in more than one way and ready to fall asleep.

"I've been thinking about not taking the pill anymore."

Surprised, I pulled back to look at Sofia's beautiful face. Her cheeks were still flushed from sex and I loved that her skin always showed proof of our lovemaking for so long. "Do you feel ready?"

At thirty-three, I was definitely at an age where questions about my childless, especially son-less, state were coming up more frequently. Everyone felt as if they had a right to meddle. My mother was among them.

Sofia laughed, then shrugged. "Does anyone ever feel ready? Is there something like the perfect timing for children?"

"I guess not, but you're still young."

"We've experienced so much in the last five years, and I'm glad you gave me the time to get my bachelor's degree. Some men don't want to wait for an heir."

"I wanted to make you happy and give us the chance to grow as a couple. I think a couple needs to be a family first before they can expand with kids."

Sofia smiled widely. "But I feel as if we've arrived. Our relationship is great. I don't have any doubts, do you?"

"About us? Never. Nor do I have any doubts that you'll be a great mother. I can't wait to have kids with you."

"So, we're going to start working on kids?"

I chuckled and let my hand run down Sofia's belly. "You make it sound as if it's hard work."

Sofia grinned. "Sometimes it is, but it's always worth it."

Sofia waited for me in the foyer when I came home, looking ready to burst. Our dog Poof, looking like a bouncing fluff-ball as he greeted me, was at her side as usual. Since she'd

gotten the dog a year ago, he'd become very protective of her. Of course, given his size, his value as a guard dog was minimal, but he made Sofia happy.

Before I could ask what the matter was, she brandished a pregnancy test, her face breaking into a huge smile. I raised my eyebrows. "You're—"

"Pregnant!" She rushed toward me and flung herself into my arms. Poof barked excitedly. I lifted Sofia off the ground, kissing her temple. It had taken us almost six months and I'd started to worry, so a weight now lifted off my shoulders. We'd become a family. I couldn't wait.

She shoved an ultrasound image at me. I glanced down at the black-and-white image but had no clue what to look for. There was a big round shape with two smaller forms. "So, she confirmed your pregnancy? Everything is okay?"

Sofia pointed at the two smaller forms in the black circles. "Two."

"Two," I repeated, not sure what she was referring to. "You're two months along?" I thought she was already in her third month.

Sofia gripped my arm. "Two babies! Twins!"

I stared at her. "You're pregnant with twins?"

She nodded. "Identical twins."

"Oh, wow." I stared down at her still flat stomach, unable to believe that she harbored two babies inside.

"Yeah. It's too early to see if they are two boys or two girls. I'm so excited."

I pulled her against me. "Your family has it with twins."

Sofia laughed. "It's in our blood."

“Apparently.” We stared at each other, and it still seemed impossible that we’d arrived here. “I love you, Mrs. Mancini.”

She grinned. “And I love you, Mr. Mancini.” She bit her lip. “Do you mind if I tell my parents? They’ll be ecstatic to hear we’re having twins, especially identical twins. Mom will probably want to go shopping with me for matching outfits right away.”

“Tell your parents, and I’ll tell my mother. She’ll probably want to go shopping with you as well. Those babies will be the best-dressed babies in Indianapolis.”

Sofia rolled her eyes, but I didn’t miss the smile she tried to stifle. I kissed her knuckles. “Next time I want to go with you to the doctor’s appointment.” That earned me a kiss before Sofia dashed off to call her parents. I watched her almost skip the steps in search for her cell phone. I loved her exuberance.

I called my mother. She hadn’t found another man since Dad had died, even though I’d encouraged her to give a new love a chance. There were a few nice widowers among my men and even among the Captains, but she had insisted on being alone. She was eager for grandchildren from me, so the name Mancini could live on and Dad’s genes could carry on.

“Danilo,” Mom said happily. “You just caught me before brunch with my ladies’ club.” Her ladies’ club consisted of the wives of the Captains and a few high-society ladies with links to the Outfit, and they met twice a week for brunch and gossip. I was glad she kept herself busy with brunch and social events.

“I won’t take long. Sofia had another ultrasound today.”

“How’s my grandchild doing? And how’s Sofia?” Her voice rose with excitement.

“They are doing well. The kids and Sofia.”

A moment of silence followed, then, “Kids?”

“Sofia is pregnant with twins.”

Mom laughed. “The Mione twin gene! I can’t believe it. How wonderful! Do you know the gender yet?”

“It’s too soon, but they are identical twins so they’re either two boys or two girls.”

Two months later, the gynecologist told us that we were expecting two boys. Sofia squeezed my hand firmly. “Are you happy?”

“I am, but I’ve been happy from the day I found out you were pregnant. I would have loved to have two daughters as well.”

“Then we would have had to keep trying until you got an heir, you know.”

I regarded her carefully. “You don’t want more than two?”

Sofia shrugged. “Two is a good number. I know many girls desperately want a daughter to dress up, but I think I’d be perfectly happy with two cute boys to dote on. I’m in no hurry to get pregnant with a third child.” She rubbed her lower back with an apologetic smile.

“I’d be happy with just two kids, but you’re still young, so if you ever change your mind, we can still give another child a chance,” I said.

After finding out the gender, everyone congratulated me. I could tell that they considered two boys a victory, especially the men. I was just relieved that Sofia wouldn’t feel pressured to give me an heir anymore.

I couldn’t wait to go hunting and hiking with my boys, to teach them all I knew about guns and show them how to fight. My dad had done all those things with me and I wanted to share that with my sons.

Danilo carried both boys in his arms while I held Poof by the leash. Those boys loved Danilo like crazy, and always wanted to be held by him when he was home. He had to work a lot, so it was only natural that they sought his closeness whenever they got the chance, and Danilo tried to make time for them as often as possible. I wasn’t too sad when they clung to Danilo occasionally. They were quite a handful, Orlando more so than Aldo, who’d been named after Danilo’s father, but together they were a force to be reckoned with. They were hard to contain sometimes.

Our cat, a red tabby stray that had one day appeared on our doorstep and never left, had chosen one of the trees in our garden as her favorite resting spot because the boys couldn’t reach her there. Not that she didn’t know how to defend herself. Both boys had been scratched more than once because they tried to carry her around. Most of the time she sat on the bench close to the pond, watching the Koi, but she never tried to hunt them—which was why Danilo had allowed her to stay.

Orlando gave me a huge grin from his dad’s arm. They were the spitting image of Danilo.

Mom opened the door before we could ring the bell, beaming at us. As usual, she was styled to perfection with

an elegant updo, a woolen pencil skirt, and a flowy silk blouse. At least she wasn't wearing long earrings or thin necklaces. Despite her perfect styling, she pulled me into a tight hug before she ripped Orlando from Danilo's hold and pressed him to her chest, not caring if her blouse got wrinkled.

Danilo chuckled. "Good day to you too, Ines."

"Danilo," she said with a laugh and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before she turned to Aldo. "I don't think Grandma's strong enough to carry both of you boys." He pouted, but Dad saved the day, appearing in the doorway. The gray streaks in his dark hair were now more dominant and the wrinkles around his eyes had deepened, but to me he still looked like the man who had walked me down the aisle to the altar. He hugged me tightly. "You look beautiful as always, ladybug. I don't know how you find time with those two boys."

"Some days I don't," I said with an exasperated laugh. It had gotten better now that they were a bit older and could keep each other entertained. But leaving them to their own devices always posed a risk to our furniture. I'd learned not to leave Poof alone with them because they'd turned him red and blue with watercolor last time.

Dad took Aldo from Danilo, then shook his hand.

"I hope you're hungry. We've prepared a big feast for tonight."

"You don't always have to go to such troubles when we visit," I said with a laugh. I saw my parents at least once a month, so it wasn't like we had to celebrate reuniting.

Mom waved me off. "I'm sure the boys are hungry."

"They always are," Danilo said.

Mom and Dad went inside with the boys, leaving us on the doorstep.

I gave Danilo an amused look. "They wouldn't even notice if we just disappeared."

“Then let’s take our luggage up to the guestroom and rest a bit until dinner,” Danilo suggested in a low voice.

“That sounds like a good idea.”

We hurried upstairs. From somewhere in the house I could hear delighted laughter of the boys.

The moment Danilo and I were behind closed doors, we ripped our clothes off, enjoying our time off.

Later at dinner, the boys practically ate their body weight in food, but I also ate more than I should have. Dad and Danilo discussed their upcoming hunting trip, a men’s weekend with Samuel and Marco. The boys would be staying with me, and Mom would come for a visit to help me. At two, they were still far too young to go along on the trip.

Orlando’s head sagged forward, his forehead briefly touching the mashed potatoes before he jerked back up. Aldo was still poking around in his food. Mom laughed and got up to clean him. Her eyes sparkled as she looked at me. Dad looked relaxed and eager for his trip.

The past really had been put to rest. We’d gone through some difficult times, but we were happy now.

Danilo met my gaze and smiled, the dimple flashing in his cheek. Whatever lay ahead of us, I was confident we’d master it.

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cora is the author of the Born in Blood Mafia Series, the Camorra Chronicles and many other books, most of them featuring dangerously sexy bad boys. She likes her men like her martinis—dirty and strong.

Cora lives in Germany with a cute but crazy Bearded Collie, as well as the cute but crazy man at her side. When she doesn’t spend her days dreaming up sexy books, she plans her next travel adventure or cooks too spicy dishes from all over the world.

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